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Category: Short Story

Baby Steps

PART I

The tiles were changing.

Seemingly without warning, Norah thought.

She peered at the ground from her bed, eyeing the floorboard in front of her. She grabbed a pebble from the bag under her pillow and dropped it gently. It sank swiftly, ending with a faint clatter from downstairs.

Her eyes widened. The tiles were changing. That was supposed to be a safe step.

“Ma, can I eat breakfast?” Tanya said quietly, tugging on her mother’s sleeve.

“Yes, just not right now,” Norah murmured, distractedly swishing her fingers through the wooden floorboard. “We’re gonna do something a little different today.”

“How different?” Tanya whined.

Norah thought for a moment while Tanya fidgeted with the fraying strings of her blue blanket.

“How about I give you a piggyback downstairs? Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Tanya made a face. “Okay,” she said with a slight frown, climbing on her mother’s back.

“I’m gonna need you to do me a favor though. Can you throw the rocks for me on every tile, even the safe ones?”

“Okay,” Tanya repeated. Norah couldn’t see her face, but the grip on her shoulders had tightened.

The first step would be the easiest. Norah hovered her feet above the floorboards to the right and left of the “safe” one. They faded into the right floorboard; she stepped on the left.

“Alright, throw the pebble for me sweetie,” she said.

The rock echoed on the wooden floorboard in front of the left. Norah let out a brief sigh of relief before stepping on that one as well.

They did that for all of the floorboards. This method was dangerous though; the entirety of a tile was never safe. It might be half of one and half of another. There might be a wide strip where you could walk, and then a sudden gap. It had been that way for the past sixteen years. Norah was eighteen when it happened: the earthquake of 2045. New York City collapsed entirely, along with other major cities, states, and entire countries in South America and Europe. Once the earthquake struck, the gravitational field of the world was eternally affected. You never knew which step could be your last, which spot on the Earth was safe, which had gravity and which did not.

Norah remembered the instant panic that ensued like it happened yesterday. She remembered her parents boarding a plane before the Earth swallowed them whole. She remembered losing the grip on her mother’s hand, watching her disappear with her father and brother among the hysterical crowd. She remembered seeing the plane plummet before it even touched the clouds, back down to the ocean nearby.

Norah had always been deathly afraid of heights. They shook her to her core, and the idea of unknowingly standing above an unspecified height at any point in time was even more terrifying.

She sat down on the stairlift gently, placing Tanya in her lap. It was one of the few things their neighbor Carlos made sure to install during the first four years. Adjustments were made worldwide to accommodate the few people still alive; roads looked like tetris patterns, and cars were a thing of the past. Entire communities of thousands became reduced to hundreds, maybe even tens. Norah remembered when her own block moved in with one another. They came carrying and wearing everything they owned- blankets, buckets of food, bags of cherished belongings, and their children on their backs.

Today, she didn’t know who in her neighborhood was still alive. The people who had moved into “her” house had long passed, everyone except for Paula and Thomas. Paula never went upstairs; she was deathly afraid of the horrid death she’d endure from there. She stayed on the couch, where she knew it was safe, and was an elderly woman with a kind disposition. Thomas was a scrawny teenager who had been a mere three years old at the time of the

earthquake, and mostly spent his days cooped up in his room. It was directly atop of the kitchen; nobody was able to forget that after Carlos plunged into the sink and snapped his neck on the faucet.

Once the stairlift descended, the pair made their way to the kitchen. Norah shot Paula a smile before setting Tanya down in a chair attached to the dining wall railings. There were no “rooms” anymore; Carlos had installed railings to the walls, and was able to attach chairs to each one, similar to the stairlift.

“Lord knows how this house is still standing,” Norah murmured, grabbing a box of pancake mix from a shelf. She glanced out the kitchen window as she poured a cup of water into the batter. Houses stood half sunken into the ground, and birds made their homes atop roofs instead. Norah couldn’t remember the last time she had seen a bird fly.

Perhaps one of the worst things that the earthquake took away from them was their ability to bury the dead. Norah gazed at spots on the ground where her friends had fallen. It was impossible to mark them, but Norah didn’t need markings to remember. She wished she could place a flower, a gravestone, anything on the spot to commemorate their deaths.

Norah blinked several times, turning her attention back to the pancakes. She began to pour palm-sized circles onto the pan.

“What about *business*? That was always a hard one for me.”

Norah glanced up from the stove; Paula was quizzing Tanya on spelling different words. She had always been adamant that despite not having the best resources to do so, Tanya should still be educated.

Tanya fidgeted in her chair. “B-I-S-N-E-S-S?” she guessed with a mischievous grin, showing off her missing canine tooth.

Paula tsked in disapproval, shaking her head as she did so. “Not quite. Here, let’s practice writing while you wait for breakfast.”

She leaned over and grabbed a magazine from the table. Her eyes scanned the table as her hand hovered over its surface. “Hm. Let me grab a pen from the kitchen real quick.”

Norah’s eyes widened. She whipped her head around, her hand accidentally slapping the bowl of batter from the counter. It sank through a tile soundlessly. She could hear the pancake already on the pan sizzling as she quickly made her way to the living room, testing her steps carefully. “Wait, don’t mov-”

The sound of nails scratching against the floor pierced the air before Paula’s shriek. Paula’s body was almost entirely swallowed by the floor, except for her hands clawing at the ground in a vain attempt to stay above the surface.

But something was different this time. It almost looked as if she was struggling with something, or someone.

“H-help,” she sobbed, her white strands of hair hanging in tangled masses around her face. Norah could feel her head pounding; she could hardly think straight above Tanya’s screaming.

“O-okay, stay right there, I’m gonna try to pull you up, okay?” she whispered, throwing pebbles on the tiles in order to step closer.

“Please, my legs, they’re-”

Paula was cut off abruptly by a deep, guttural sound that resonated through the floor; Norah felt the vibration of it below her feet. A red, almost transparent hand crept up from the tile and grabbed Paula’s mouth. It’s bony fingers wrapped around her mouth before snapping her neck.

Norah let out a small yelp. She covered her mouth and closed her eyes, body frozen in place. The smell of the burnt pancakes permeated the house. Muted tears dribbled down her cheeks and dripped from her chin, disappearing into the ground along with Paula’s limp body.

PART II

“We are all sinners! We must recognize the crimes we have committed! I beg of you all, repent now before you are dragged to Hell!”

Norah shut off the television. Since the tiles began changing, there had been multiple accounts of “demon-related” deaths, all witnesses describing red or white skeletal hands dragging the bodies of their victims into the ground, or, what apparently seemed to be the general consensus, Hell.

Norah didn’t know whether she believed it or not. What she did know was that no step was safe now. It was dangerous standing in any given spot for an extended amount of time. The tiles were now changing by the hour; a week ago, it had been by the day. The markings they had followed for years meant nothing now.

She glanced at the clock hanging above their refrigerator. It was 5:21 p.m. In thirteen minutes, the gravity of the ground would shift. Meaning, she had thirteen more minutes to try to communicate with the monsters below her feet from a safe distance.

Her last attempt had gone poorly. She had lowered a fishing rod from the stairlift with a note reading, “Who are you and what do you want with us?” She’d felt the rod snag swiftly on something, and then a rapid struggle between

more than one entity. Thankfully, she had replaced the string with a stronger cord to avoid the line snapping. When she was able to reel the line back in, a dismembered and bloody hand lay attached on the hook.

They seemed to have a sense of humor when it came to Norah's attempts at communication, and seemed to be capable of reading the notes she wrote. She initially had tried lowering frozen fish and chicken on the rod as bait, but they came back up untouched. The "demons" were only responsive to her notes, to human contact.

Norah collapsed into the stairlift chair. She gazed at Tanya across the room, who was sitting in the living wall's chair content, and coloring silently on a sheet of paper. She had never felt so much love for a human being before.

Burying her face in her hands and sighing, Norah took a deep breath. She had to try. She didn't want Tanya growing up in a world where it was so easy to die. If the rumors were true, and the earthquake had opened a gate to Hell through the cracks in the Earth's gravity, then she had to at least try to negotiate with the devils somehow. Make them see that she and her daughter were worth staying alive. After all, she didn't have any other ideas.

She glanced at the clock again; it now read 5:30.

"Thomas!" she yelled, startling Tanya in the process. She didn't like being so far away from Tanya. Pulling herself to her feet, she began to violently hurl pebbles at the ground as she stepped towards Tanya. She hoped the ones that sank through were hitting a demon's head. "Please tell me you're sitting in a railing chair right now!"

"Yeah, yeah, Norah!" Thomas replied faintly from upstairs. Norah frowned, then shook her head. She tried to remember when she was a teenager.

Had she been as ungrateful?

"Whatcha drawing?" she exclaimed cheerfully, shifting her tone swiftly. She lifted Tanya in her arms before plopping in the chair herself and placing Tanya in her lap. She tugged at Tanya's unkempt hair, taking it upon herself to braid it somehow.

"This is Josh," Tanya murmured distractedly. Norah peered over Tanya's shoulder, and instantly felt her breath catch in her throat.

Tightening her jaw and trying to keep her voice as even as possible, she whispered, "And who is Josh?"

Tanya lifted the red pen from her yellow notepad proudly. She had just finished sketching a gaunt figure hunched over the railing chair where they were sitting. An eerie grin stretched across its face, flashing a perfect set of pitch black teeth. In the depiction, Tanya had drawn a stick figure, presumably her, smiling and hugging the figure. Norah felt a shiver creep up her spine; her own brown eyes darted besides them. There was nothing there, but she couldn't shake the sinister feeling now that she was being watched.

"He visits us a lot. Sometimes he-"

Tanya never got the chance to finish her sentence before Thomas's bed crashed into the living room sofa, splitting in half. Norah buried Tanya in her chest and let out a shriek as a sliver of wood pierced her arm. The clock above the refrigerator had fallen onto a tile and shattered; beyond the cracked glass, it read 5:35.

Thomas had scooted to the upper side of the bed, his emaciated body clinging on to the bedpost for dear life. He lay there motionless, not daring so much as to breathe. The lower right hand corner of the bed was already sinking into the ground.

"I'm falling," he breathed, almost in disbelief. Tears streamed down his red face.

"You're not, you won't, j-just, give me a second," Norah exclaimed, leaving Tanya in the chair and grabbing the railing. She pulled herself up to her feet slowly, her legs wobbling precariously. She inched closer to the wreckage cautiously, testing each tile with her toe before making her next step.

But where to step? And how to get Thomas to safety if I don't know where it's safe? She thought to herself, the panic rising in her chest like water vapor from a teapot. She hastily snatched the fishing rod from the kitchen countertop and held out one side for Thomas to grab.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Thomas screamed. Norah flinched. It sounded as if his vocal chords were being ripped apart from one another.

"I'm going to die here," he whispered.

"Y-you won't. Grab onto the rod, I'm-"

"What?" he interrupted, shooting her a dirty look. "You're gonna reel me in like I'm a freaking fish?" He shut his eyes abruptly, shuddering at the sight of the disappearing bed. His knuckles had turned a ghostly white from his grip on the bedpost. Out of the corner of her eye, Norah saw Tanya fidgeting restlessly in her seat. Her eyes seemed to be focused on the other half of the bed.

"Well, I haven't got any other ideas, so isn't it worth a try?" she roared back.

An uneasy calm suddenly seemed to wash over Thomas's face. He opened his eyes to look at the rest of the bed again. It was falling slowly, as if the Earth was savoring every bite of digestion.

"I'm going to die here," he repeated with bleak acceptance. Norah's eyes darted to the other sinking half of the bed. They both froze in place as a white skeletal hand grasped at the mattress.

"Thomas," Norah breathed, her eyes widening. "Grab the rod."

This time, Thomas didn't put up a fight. He clasped his hands as tightly as he could around the thin end of the fishing rod. Norah yanked it towards her with all the strength she could muster. His scrawny body flopped against the ground as his feet skimmed over the tiles, sinking in and out of some. He was just scraggly enough for Norah to drag him to the kitchen wall railings where she stood; his body slammed against the wall.

Thomas let go of the rod, wincing as he clutched the railings. He gazed at his right hand; the fishing hook had dug into his palm when Norah reeled in the line. A pang of guilt struck her as Thomas pressed the hand against his shirt tightly.

"Are you okay?" Norah said softly, her eyes wide and voice barely audible at the sight of blood.

He scoffed, his eyes scrunched shut. Both sides of the bed had sunk halfway through the ground now. Norah could see an arm and the tip of a skull rising above the floor, using the ground as leverage to pull itself up.

Thomas opened his eyes and looked at Norah, his face depicting an uneasily calm expression again. He took her hands in his and dipped his toe into the tile in front of them; it faded right through the floor.

"Thank you, for everything Norah. Really," he said, his voice quivering. He paused, taking a deep, shuddering breath. "But I'd rather die than live like this."

He paused again. His hands were shaking. The blood from his hand had trickled onto hers. Norah stammered, not having any idea of what to say.

"I'm sorry. You guys take care of yourselves, okay?"

Dropping her hands before she had any time to react, Thomas snatched the broken clock from the floor and hurled it at the white arm like a frisbee. Letting out a screech of pain, the creature loosened his grip on the tiles and retreated back into the ground. Without a moment of hesitation, Thomas leapt onto the tile in front of them. The last thing Norah saw before the Earth swallowed him whole was his bloodied hand with a shard of glass embedded in the palm.

Norah gazed at the scene before her, still in a state of shock. She stared at the blood on her trembling hands. She felt torn. She didn't know if he could blame Thomas for his actions. He had lived in terror since he was three, never had any family . . .

"T-Tanya, we're gonna be okay," she murmured, whipping her head around to find Tanya. "We're gonna be oka-"

Her heart stopped. Tanya was nowhere to be seen. She whirled around the room, her palms suddenly beginning to sweat as her breathing became labored. Her heart pounded in her chest as if the bed had rammed into her body instead.

She let out an ear-splitting scream that reverberated throughout the now empty house. Crumbling into her spot on the ground and pressing her knees against her chest, she began to sob uncontrollably.

Norah always thought she was afraid of heights, but truth be told, nobody is ever really afraid of heights. They're afraid of falling, of the instability, of feeling the ground vanish beneath their feet and being helpless to an endless descent.

That day, as she clutched the fishing rod cord in her palms, Norah realized she wasn't afraid of heights.