

After the End

By Annie Lloyd

The city was dark. It had been that way for a long time. There used to be life there, there used to be humans, but not anymore. Now all was quiet. And dark. Very, very dark. I was scared, I didn't know what was going to happen, I didn't know what happened. Everything just stopped. I didn't love the city, but this was worse. Standing over the ghost city, perched in a tree, I watched two cats fighting over a dead and rotten bird. Life was hard. It was truly every animal for themselves. All fight, if you wanted to survive. Full of loneliness, I ran back up to my drey. Being a squirrel, I was prey. And being prey, you could never fully trust someone. My drey was just how I left it. Cold. not like a house should be. I curled up using my tail as a blanket. How did this happen? As the sun sank into the horizon I settled into a deep restless sleep.

Light rain was blowing into the drey. My eyes opened, the freezing air had turned my fur to thousands of tiny icicles. The clouds were swirling ominously. It seemed like a normal morning. Suddenly the tree was shaking. I braced my feet on the floor, as the shaking got bigger and bigger, then... nothing. Everything was still, quiet.

"HELLO!" I jumped back in shock. An eye was peering inside my drey through a small hole in the side.

"HI!" I tried to gulp down air, but my lungs seemed to be imploding. "HI!"

"Um, hi." I said timidly. " who are yo-" something shot me in the face, it was wet, squishy and very fast. My immediate thought was "it's trying to eat me!" but after a second, it stopped. I tried to get out, except this animal was blocking the exit.

"You taste like dirt." Said the animal as it crawled inside my drey. He was a dog. A small dog with a long black furry body, short brown legs, and a shaggy brown face.

"Who are you?" I asked as I was shoved against the wall.

"Opie!" he said enthusiastically. "I like it here, it's warm. What's your name?"

I hesitated, "Spinner"

The rain outside was getting heavier.

"This is a nice place." Opie remarked matter of factly.

"Uh, thanks?" my drey was anything but 'nice'

"I've been thinking," said Opie thoughtfully, "you seem nice, do you want to come to the Pot with me?" Pot? I had never heard of that before.

"Pot?" I asked curiously. Opie layed down, yawning. "People around here don't really know about it. They think I'm telling poppy-cock."

"How do you get there?"

"Well," Opie thought for a moment "first you go to the Thunderbox, then through the magic door, the tunnel, in the pool, down the slide, out the front door and boom. You're in the Pot." For a second I was very confused, then I realized, Opie was *lying*. There wasn't a Pot, Opie was telling me, in his words 'poppy-cock'

"Let's go!" Opie sprang up and stretched.

"No." I said firmly.

"Why?"

"Because we just met, and you're lying."

"Why?"

"I don't know, you tell me."

“Tell you what?”

“Why you're lying!”

“Just come with me to the Thunderbox? I want to show you, nobody ever believes me.”

He looked at me with giant sad puppy eyes.

“Ok fine.” I threw my arms up. “I'll go with you to this ‘Thunderbox’, but if it's not there, I'm leaving.”

“Ok lets go!”

My guard was high. I was on enemy ground. Everything was enemy ground. Either a predator's territory, or enemy squirrel. Walking through the dark woods, I couldn't shake the feeling I was being watched. Opie didn't seem to share my concern, He kept running after moths, and barking just to hear himself make noise. Maybe he wasn't concerned because he knew I would be the one in the trap, or maybe he was just what I thought he was, an airhead.

“Just up here,” Opie sped up, cutting my thoughts short. “The Thunderbox!” It was a small, old, and dented porta potty. In faded pink paint along the side were the words ‘Thunderbox, make your own storm’ Slightly horrified, I caught up to Opie.

“Wow.” I said, very unimpressed. “Now I need to burn my eyes.”

“I know, pretty great right? Come on” He strutted around to the front. Trying not to look at the image on the side, I followed. Opie jumped up, turned the latch, and the door swung open with a *creeeekk*. Inside was just as I thought,

“Yep, it's a porta potty” I matter of factly gestured at the rain covered walls. “It's just plastic. I was right.” Opie didn't say anything. I looked around to find I was alone.

“Opie?”

“Yes?” His voice echoed

“Where are you?”

“I’m down here” The sound was coming from the toilet. I walked over to it and looking down, called out. No response.

“Opie?” I said agen. Then My paws slipped on the wet plastic and I fell headfirst down into the pit.

My back hit the wet bottom with a splash. “Ew!” I gaged out.

“HI SPINNER!” Opie was next to me, rolling in the liquid.

I gagged agen. “Don’t roll in it!”

“Don’t worry,” Opie stood up “I’m twenty four percent positive it’s just mucky water.

Come on!” he sloshed over to a stretch of wall. “Prepare to be amazed.”

With a huge effort, Opie jumped up and hit something on the ceiling with his nose.

There was a great rumble, and a panel in the wall slid back to reveal a hallway. My jaw dropped. There was a hallway underground?

“This doesn’t mean anything.” I folded my arms.

“Yes it does!” Opie vaulted the barrier between the muck and the hallway. I stood there for a moment, debating whether or not to follow, but curiosity won. So I waded over to the barrier, and clambered over. “SPINNER!” Opie ran over and tackled me.

“Dude, *I just saw you.*” Opie shook the water off, making me twice as wet. “Ew! Do you have to shake off right next to me?”

“Yes.”

“Why!”

“Because it's more fun!” and he ran off down the hall. I groaned, and started running too.

When I caught up to him the hallway had turned to a cinder block tunnel.

“You're ready to be wet?” He pushed a button on the metal doors that were in front of us.

“Oh no, why?”

“Because these people are very germ-phobic.” The doors slid open. “ENTER IF YOU DARE!” We walked inside. We were standing in a metal box. “Step four, check.” Opie didn't seem nervous at all, I was shaking.

“Have you done this before?” I asked, trying hard to keep my voice steady.

“I do this all the time. This is the fun part!” Why did that concern me? “Hold your breath.”

And the floor opened right underneath us. “DOPE!” That was the last thing I heard before I plunged into the giant vat of liquid. I panicked, I couldn't swim! The liquid stung my eyes as I looked around for Opie. All the muck from the porta-potty was coming off me like a giant cloud in the clear water. “Opie!” I screamed, flailing around. but it only came out as a gurgle. I needed air! Then I spotted him sinking and making weird noises. Was he hurt? I struggled over to him and pulled him up, towards the surface. I gasped, coughing and spluttering, with Opie next to me.

“Hey! Why did you do that?” He wasn't even out of breath. “You ruined Aquaman, the defeat of king spinach the third!”

“I thought you were hurt!”

“AWWWW! You love me!” He hugged me, nearly drowning me in the process.

“I don't.” I snapped, “I just didn't want you to drown. It's kind of instinct”

“Noooooooo, you're my best friend! You love me!”

“How do we get out?” I asked, panting. The doors had closed above us.

“This way,” I grabbed his collar, and he dived back under. The pool turned out to be a lot smaller than I thought. Opie pulled me through a short underwater tunnel, then we climbed up steps to a big hole in the wall. I was glad to be out, swimming was definitely not my thing.

“We have reached step five, the slide!”

“What does that do?” I was more anxious than excited.

“Don't worry, you'll like this one. Ladies first,” he bowed me toward the slide. I sat down feet first, breathing hard. “On three. Redy? Three!” he gave a shove, and my body flew forward. A very long tunnel slide later, I emerged dry and fluffy. Opie came hurtling out head first, just as I got out of the way.

“I love it in there,” Opie said as he brushed himself off. “It's so warm. World's best dryer.” I liked it too. I had never been that warm in my whole life.

“Hello.” a voice said behind us. I whipped around. An old dog was standing behind us.

“Welcome to the Pot,” she said “I am Maggie Moo Vincent the medical examiner and tour guide, thi-”

“MAGGGGIIIEEEE!!!!” Opie ran at Maggie, licking her face. “HI! I MISSED YOU SO MUCH! Maggie, this is Spinner, my very best friend, Spinner, this is Maggie, THE BEST BIG SISTER EVER!!! I missed you so much.” he lapsed into silence, staring at Maggie with big puppy eyes and quivering with happiness.

“As I was saying,” Maggie said, turning back to me. “This is Opie Magoo Vincent, my brother.”

After we had been tested head to tail for something called Covid19, Maggie led us through a wooden door. The sight was breathtaking. We were on a balcony overlooking a great crater in the earth. Everywhere there were waterfalls, and trees. It was sunny, Everything was lush, warm and green. There were all sorts of animals, none of which looked like they wanted to kill you, they were maybe even, happy. I inhaled deeply.

"I know right?" Maggie said, looking out over the crater "pretty dang awesome."

"Let's Go!" I looked over my shoulder. Opie was wearing an aviator helmet with goggles, and sitting in a sidecar to a motorcycle.

"You wanna see this place?" Maggie asked, already getting on her motorcycle.

As we sped along the roads and shops built into the side of the canyon, questions were spilling out of me.

"Why is this called the Pot?"

"Because it looks like a giant pot in the earth"

"What was that pool for?"

"That was the sanitation pit," Maggie yelled over the roar of the wind. "I bet you can guess what it does."

"If this is here, why are animals still out there?"

"We can't risk the virus getting in, it's what wiped out humans. That's why we send out scouts, like Opie. They look for animals who still have life left in them, and bring them here. Our mission is to get everyone here healthy and safe, then we'll try and rebuild little by little."

ONE YEAR LATER,

“Hey Opie?” We were sitting outdoors at a cafe built into the wall of the crater.

“Hhmm?” he answered through a mouthful of toast.

“Remember when you first brought me here? I didn't trust anyone. I didn't trust you, so how come you were so nice to me?” With a huge effort, he swallowed.

“Well...sometimes all you have to do is try. Try to be nice. Sometimes all someone needs is a friend.” Then his voice got deep and important. “For what are we if we are alone? What are we if we do not care for others, and they do not care in return? Yes, at the base of it all is love, and if love isn't there, what are we?”

“Wow. That was very poetic.”

But as I laid in bed that night, I thought, Opie might just have a point.