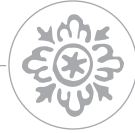


FROM

## *The Lightest Object in the Universe*

BY KIMI EISELE



**A**t the end of a long and narrow street not far from the sea, right around the time of the spring equinox, the sun rose as a sliver between two skyscrapers. Carson Waller could see it if he stepped out onto the tiny balcony of his apartment at precisely the right time. One morning in mid-March, he woke just as the light was shifting, the beige color of his bedroom walls warming to yellow. Time to rise. To admire the light and to tend to the tasks of this strange new life: fill water buckets, forage for food, track down supplies. In a few days, he'd leave this apartment—this whole city—behind.

He rolled onto his back and exhaled. The inhale came of its own accord and, with it, a surprising and fragrant tang. Sweetness. The smell was unmistakable. Citrus. Oranges. How was that possible here, right now, near the end of winter? He breathed in again. There it was.

He thought immediately of Beatrix. Her smile, her auburn hair, her hands, the sound of her voice. Closing his eyes, he inhaled again and imagined her next to him, the weight and warmth of her almost real.

He lay still. The cold morning fell over him. When he opened his eyes, the light had shifted and the smell of oranges was gone. All that remained was a cavern inside his chest.

Shivering from the cold, he dressed and went to the bathroom sink, where he scooped enough water from a bucket into his hands to rinse them. Since the rooftop cisterns had emptied, he'd been hauling water up from the street.

He toasted two pieces of stale bread over the gas flame of the stove. Another temporary luxury. It would probably go soon as well. He sprinkled some salt over the dry toast, cut up a mushy apple, and carried his breakfast into the living room.

From the window, he could see the vendors below setting out their goods on the sidewalk. This was part of the adaptation: you could simplify and run to the country, or you could buy and trade and sell. The marketplace was immortal, but it, too, had changed. Now the collections were random and personal, spread across blankets on the ground. Coffee makers, monogrammed towels, heirloom tea sets, little motors that no longer turned, tangles of useless electrical cords. Even a good find carried a certain bitter aftertaste. And yet there was no telling what might become suddenly useful. An extension cord made for a fine clothesline. Large Tupperware storage bins could hold gallons of water.

He held binoculars to his eyes. One of the vendors was on all fours, reaching across the blanket to arrange pots and dishes and utensils into tidy rows. She was portly and blond and encumbered by a long, heavy coat. A small dog curled up near her feet. She placed clothing into piles and arranged books by color. At the far corner of the blanket, she'd put the things not easy to categorize—a game of Trivial Pursuit, a stack of file folders, a computer keyboard.

A bulky man in a leather jacket moved swiftly along the sidewalk, and Carson tracked him through the binoculars. It was Ayo, one of his building's doormen, before the layoffs six months ago.

Ayo, a Nigerian, had immigrated to the States with his wife nearly a decade ago. He was an educated man, once a student activist. "It is not always a good idea to advertise one's political ideas, but sometimes it is necessary," he once said.

Carson had crossed paths with Ayo a few weeks ago on the street—the first time he'd seen him since the layoffs.

"Mr. Principal!" Ayo had called out from half a block away. "It's you! I thought maybe you had dissolved in a solution of vinegar. You are holed up in your apartment like a mouse?"

"I have not dissolved, no," Carson had said, smiling. "It is nice to see you, Ayo."

"Every day is a blessing, yes," Ayo had said.

Ayo was a hustler now, with access to the new black market, where he could get soap, butter, coffee, meat, flour, batteries, fuel, and almost anything else. "Run by Africans," he had explained that day. "That is why they call it

the ‘*black* market,’ sir. We Africans are quite adept at adversity. Or maybe, sir, because we are such good con artists.” He had laughed and jabbed an elbow into Carson’s ribs.

With the supermarkets stripped and dark, it was a lucky and necessary thing to have a supply man. The shipping containers had become bloated whales stuck up on the sand. It was vendors like Ayo who kept people fed, rolling shopping carts up and down the streets, selling canned beans and stale rice they’d hoarded, or vegetables they’d somehow grown or gleaned from farms outside the city.

Carson tracked Ayo from the window, watching him flow down the sidewalk.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COUNTRY, in the back of a wagon, Beatrix Banks felt as if she were on a choppy sea, as if all she had to do was yield to circumstance. But what circumstance was this? No metro rail to shuttle her through the city and over the bay; instead, horses. When she’d left the US nearly two months earlier, no one had yet thought to attach a horse to a cart and haul passengers around. At this moment, despite the bumpy ride, she was grateful someone had.

Exhausted and disoriented, Beatrix dug in her backpack for her cell phone. She should call her housemates, Hank and Dolores, tell them she was on her way. But the phone, of course, had been dead for weeks. She held it in both hands, like a fragile, lifeless bird.

Across from her in the wagon, a woman, about fifty, wrapped in a purple shawl, gave Beatrix a sympathetic frown.

“You can kiss that phone goodbye,” said a man next to her. He coughed once, and Beatrix stiffened. Was there still flu here?

“No phone service at all? Landlines?” she asked, inching away from the man.

“Only if you’re willing to saw off an arm and a leg,” the woman in purple said.

There was some murmuring among the other passengers about radio communication and solar power. “What about the almighty generator that preacher uses?” someone said.

Beatrix put her phone back in her backpack.

She watched the sun inch higher into the sky. Things here had unraveled quickly. No more phone service. Intermittent power. Horses on the highway. She felt panic rise inside. Just get me to my people, she thought.

The wagon dropped Beatrix a few blocks from home, and as the sound of the horse hooves receded into the distance, she felt herself relax a little. Despite her fatigue, she walked quickly. Her house glimmered like a beacon, sunlight bouncing off the windows and warming the front porch. Beatrix headed up the walkway just as a tall man with shaggy hair came out the front door carrying a bicycle. Her downstairs neighbor—Joe, was it?

It took a moment before he recognized her. “You’re back. Where were you?”

“Mexico City,” she told him. “A fair-trade convention. Or what was supposed to be a fair-trade convention.” It dawned on her that what she’d maneuvered—flying south across the border in the midst of a global melt-down—was more of a miracle than she’d realized.

“That was brave of you,” he said.

“Or just dumb.”

He looked up from the bicycle and held out his hand. “Beatrice, right? I’m Dragon.”

“Beatrix, with an x,” she said.

“So how did you get home?”

“A complicated hitchhike,” she said, explaining how the airlines had folded, and then the bus lines, and how what was supposed to be a ten-day trip had turned into six weeks, until she’d finally found a cargo trucker with enough room, fuel, and business smarts to transport her, along with a tired diplomat and a handful of US soldiers, to Tijuana. “As soon as we crossed the border, they all knelt to kiss the fucking pavement.”

“Well, that was lucky,” he said.

Beatrix nodded, feeling grateful. “Isn’t your name Joe?”

“Yeah, formally. I go by Dragon now. A resurrected nickname. Fiercer, I guess,” he said, lifting one of his eyebrows and making it disappear behind a dark curl on his head.

She had the urge to pull him into a hug. But they barely knew each other. “It is good to be home,” she conceded, picking up her backpack.

“You know they’re gone, right?” he said as she started up the stairs. “Your roommates.”

“Hank and Dolores? What do you mean?”

“Yeah. They went north.”

“North?” Beatrix said, feeling like she’d just been punched in the stomach.

“A whole group went together,” Dragon said. “They loaded all their stuff into a wagon and headed toward wine country. More fertile, I guess.” He scoffed a little as he said this, then shrugged.

“What? You don’t think it’s safe?” Beatrix asked. “I mean, if everyone’s going.”

“If everyone were jumping off a bridge, would you?”

“So you don’t think it’s a good idea. To go north.”

“I just told you what I thought,” he said, and turned back to his bicycle.

Beatrix went upstairs, the punch to her stomach now a grip in her chest.

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