

The Future and Why We are Afraid

by Kenton deAngeli

Every month my roommate and I try very hard to pay the rent, but the walk to the bank is long, and there are many stores on the way. On the way to the bank from our house there are at least a comic book store, an ice cream parlor, a bakery, and a pet shop.

The walk to the bank is very dangerous, because the hospital is also on the way, and some months we only make it a few blocks before we are overcome with amazement by the display windows, and he says, "Let's spend the rent money on comic books," and I say, "Definitely not, that's a bad idea, we'll never do that," and suddenly we are stepping from the comic book store, our arms full of comic books, in stacks so high we can barely see to walk home. We haven't paid rent in months, but we know the stories of all the superheroes, and our words are muffled with warm bread, our bellies are stretched cool with ice cream. We are insatiable, my roommate and I, and we never think about the future.

One month we bought a dog. You would have liked this dog. She is very smart and we think undoubtedly destined for great things. We couldn't decide what to name the dog, so we call her by many different ones: Lassie, Fido, Bojangles. We tried to teach her several tricks, but the dog does not enjoy learning what we want to teach it. Instead, she invents her own, which she shows to us proudly. One she is particularly good at is finding her way into our rooms, past the closed doors, and chewing things until we cannot recognize them, no matter how hard we try. She also excels at peeing where we tell her not to, and can do it without us seeing, no matter how careful we are, no matter how long we stare, even until the walls are burned into our eyes and we have to blink over and over. When she does these tricks, we call her "Shit-head." We call her "Houdini" sometimes, too, and this is because she is the best at escaping from

behind fences, and doors, and walls, and if the front door ever opens for even a second, she is a flash, a stripe of a dog, rushing across the street and around the neighborhood, jumping on everything to celebrate what a good escapist she is, forcing us to race after her and explain to strangers why our dog is named fuck-face.

It is never quiet where we live. Our next-door neighbor is a twenty-four hour taxi service that whispers to us blaringly at night across the thin walls, and keeps us company when we are alone in our beds and it is dark and our eyes are closed under our pillows. Across the street stand the vacant-eyed sleepless, who watch everything blankly and sell drugs to people in cars all night and all day. We have developed an understanding with them, the people across the street: my roommate and I do not call the cops on them, and they are friendly when they laugh at us practicing our skateboard tricks in the street. Neither of us are very good at skateboard tricks, but someday we will probably be in great skateboard exhibitions, with bright lights and loud announcers and hundreds of admirers who will clamor for our autographs as we skateboard to our limousine and watch other celebrities on TV the whole way home.

Sometimes the people who walk and stand all night visit us on our porch, and they tell us that our house is very old; that it used to be a theater, and a brothel, and sometimes we joke that behind the bricked-up fireplace is a stockpile of money and drugs and snuff films, and that there are motes of crack dust everywhere, floating in midafternoons through the air, showing us the shape of the sunlight through the gaps in the blinds. My roommate says this is why he gets the shakes, sometimes, when we are outside and the hospital is looming in the distance, because he is addicted to the crack in our house. He is lying, but I go home with him anyway, and we lock the doors and do not leave the house.

We are excellent at superlatives, my roommate and I, and we often have contests to see who can think of the biggest plant, or the brightest sea creature, or the strongest superhero, or the most dangerous skateboard trick. He says, "What's the oldest thing you've

ever seen?" and I say, "The Liberty Bell," and he says, "The Grand Canyon," and I say, "Dirt," and he says, "the Sun," and then suddenly I am telling him about my great aunt, when I was six, who lived forever in the hospital bed; who had a cerebrovascular accident. Which is such a strange name for a stroke, and she couldn't learn my name, and I was terrified to go near her because I didn't yet understand that kind of thing wasn't contagious.

My roommate and I tell excellent jokes about the future, and sometimes we stay up very late at night telling jokes to each other, and sometimes we laugh so hard tears are streaming from our eyes, even when we have not been telling jokes, even when we have been silent for a long time.

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It is a warm evening, and my roommate and I are at a restaurant with the rent money in our pockets, ordering everything we've ever wanted to eat, and we are both in love with the waitress, who piles our plates high and smiles at us like we are sunlight after a storm. We order tea in giant steaming pots and drain our mugs over and over, burning our tongues and watching for the outlines of tomorrows in the shapes of the leaves, asking the future to undress for us, to show us the things it has hidden in the folds of its clothes, in the lines of its skin. We tell the waitress the winning lottery numbers, the next time it will snow, how she has lost her necklace. We look deep into the dark of the mugs and tell her the name of the city she will mouth in her sleep that night, the scent of her grandmother as a girl; that one day she will fall in love and never stop.

Late at night, the zombies come to our house; it is never quiet where we live, and the zombies stay up all night because they cannot sleep, and they play charades and try on different clothes and laugh and try to remember how it felt before, when they were not zombies. Sometimes they have sex, and they look at each other with their eyes wide and staring and cannot tell if they enjoy it or not. I have known them well, the zombies, and sometimes they sit quietly and steady the motion of their hands and listen very intently

to something far beyond, and I can see in them still the people I knew.

The zombies have not always been zombies. They were fortune-tellers like you, once, and fantastic ones. They told beautiful wonders, half-understood glories; their eyes far, their fingers quickly delicate, their teeth chattering endless secrets. They spun their tales ceaselessly, intoxicate, weaving magnificent visions from themselves and launching them into the world, furiously, furiously, until they were gone, until there were no more to tell, until they had emptied out the insides of them, until they had no more fortunes.

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We also call our dog an acrobat, because she can jump very high and balance on small ledges over and over, and is not distracted when things fall and crash around her. She is becoming very good at this. Someday she will join the circus and become a star, but not until she learns more tricks.

One day the dog will learn the trapeze trick, and she, too, will leave us forever.

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It has become very cramped inside our house. We must step gingerly and squeeze by each other in the hallways; we are very careful about which doors we open. This is not only because we spend several hundred dollars a month on new stuff, but also because we have not been able to take out the trash. We are not sure why, only that there is something large and indescribable that compels us not to throw away our garbage, that forces us to keep everything we have, even if we don't want to. It happened by accident, almost: every week we collect the trash and try very hard to pull it to the curb, but our arms are always unwilling, our feet are rooted to the ground. We pull the trash out of the bins and take it all back inside, arranging it into rows in our hallways, in piles out back, until the closets are overfilled and the walls are hidden.

In the mornings we get up and ignore the trash for as long as we can. It is a contest: we brush our teeth and walk to the kitchen table, we make our breakfasts and open our eyes widely at one another;

and then one of us will say the wrong word, or gesture too far, or suddenly remember why we cannot open the window, and trash will spill everywhere, an avalanche that crashes and explodes across the floor a noisy galaxy; empty pens and bottlecaps and broken glass.

What we like best about the day is mornings, and waking; before we have opened our eyes and are still half-dreaming, when we have not yet remembered where we are, when we can believe, for a moment, that waking is like starting everything over again, that if we do not move, not a muscle, even, time will forget itself with us, will slow its endless motion and rest, the still sleep of wanting nothing, the warm arms of a lover that wrap so tightly and so well they will sometimes be the only image you can recall of a person, afterwards.

Every night we collapse under the weight of the trash, our feet sore, our limbs heavy and tired; every day the trash sticks to us until we are covered, until motion is impossible in its effort — but in the mornings we are light, always, our heads clear and our footsteps easy.

Some mornings my roommate and I wake with words in our mouths. If they are small ones, we swallow them easily and forget them, but if they are large we wake choked, sputtering, unable to breathe around the shapes of them, strange and brittle between our teeth. Because there are no empty trashcans in the house, we stuff them under the cushions of the couch, behind the television; we empty endless bottles and refill them, we pile them into the unused corners of our yard, we find small spaces in the piles of trash and shove them in. It is not important where they go, only that they are covered by the trash, that they are hidden, that we will not find them by accident. We swallow our breakfast with the words the night has brought us; we bring our spoons to our mouths and find stray punctuation in our cereal. We do not know why this happens, why our mouths are full in the mornings, why letters sometimes slip from our lips when we talk, no matter how much we try to hold them in.

When we cannot avoid talking about the future, we think only of robots and flying cities; we imagine the colonization of outer space, the end of sickness, nanotechnology and stem cells, how in the future no one will even remember what overdosing is, or wake with a word in their mouth so large they are choked into a cerebrovascular accident.

Once, when I had not talked to you in a long time, I woke with your name in my mouth. I could not remember if I had dreamt of you; my dreams are shadows, always, that slip quickly from the bright morning, hasting to their familiar darknesses to wait for sleep to come again.

I did not have to look at the name to know it was yours; my tongue knew the shape of the letters in my mouth so well, and I pulled it carefully into my hands. It was wet, and had small toothmarks. I felt strangely guilty at these, the delicate wounds I had done you, and I spoke a small apology to the morning, and to the light that had woken me, because you were not there to hear. I did not know what to do with your name. It shivered quietly in my hands, like a small bird, and I held it to my ear and listened to its soft flutterings; I held my tongue to the roof of my mouth and tried to remember its taste.

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My roommate does not like when the zombies come to visit. They scare him, because they are very noisy and they do not clean up after themselves. I do not like them either; but they, too, miss you, and missing people is like carrying a weight. It grows, and when there are suddenly many bearers, the relief of lightness forgets everything else.

I have listened to them all night, and sometimes they come very close to some gigantic revelation; they start to speak faster and faster, and their eyes grow wide and their words almost reach the things that will make them remember, they are so close they can feel the thoughts pulling at their tongues, and if they could only reach a little farther — but dawn always comes, and soon, and the zombies cannot be here past daybreak. When the sun comes, they forget

everything, cannot help that it all speeds away, and they have to leave for the places they came from, and start all over when night returns.

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We are waiting for night in front of the furniture store, my roommate and I, perched atop more furniture than we will ever need, stacks of couches and lamps and chairs and bookshelves piled so high they reach above the rooftops, at least three times taller than all the trash in our house could reach, no matter how narrowly we stacked it. We can see the entire city from here, we are so high and so far from it. We do not speak; the wind groans thin in our ears and finds small gaps in our clothing, and we shiver and watch the things it brings us. I wonder how far it has traveled, if the world has grown old after so many circlings, if sunsets have become familiar. I wondered if it has found you, if it had caught you long ago, in some dark corner of the morning, suddenly gusting cold, and stolen some small thing of yours: a written list, several hairs, the smoothness of your skin under your collarbone. The furniture creaks, and all at once my roommate and I are dashing along the tops of the precarious towers we have made, snatching everything we can reach from the wind and stuffing it into our pockets, leaning unstably out over the large empty space below, frantically balancing on the skyscrapers of beds and tables and wardrobes as they sway threateningly from side to side. Someday the dog will learn the trapeze trick, and then she will do these things easily in her bright circus costume, and the whole tent will erupt with joy, and everyone will cheer like they forgot they ever learned anything ugly about the world, even the jaded old ringmaster forced to tip his hat and find a crooked smile.

One month I woke very early, before my roommate did, before dawn, even, and left to pay the rent without him. I walked slowly and watched my feet; I looked into every shop window and imagined leaving with my arms full, and walking home without glancing back at the hospital even once, and by the time I arrived I was able to close my eyes and walk inside. I must have been shivering, and my

steps were slow, and the receptionist smiled soothingly and asked if I'd just arrived in town; I tried to explain about the storefronts, and the crack dust, and the trash, but her forehead began to wrinkle and I told her, yes, I had just flown in, could she please tell me where you were?

From outside the door I could hear the click and wheeze of your breathing, and I thought about my great aunt and how she wasn't contagious but I held my breath anyway and stepped in and there you were. You looked so wan under the fluorescent lights, and so old, like the very oldest thing, and I turned them off and opened the blinds, and in the morninglight that had made you glow so well I bent over the bed. And I could tell immediately, it made me so glad I couldn't help but laugh, because you were not there. It was your body but you had left long ago, to whatever mystery you could find; you were hiding nowhere inside, you who were never afraid.

I leave. I go home and wake my roommate, and when the zombies come tonight we will already have been gone; we will use the rent money to buy a truck, and we will haul all the trash to the city dump; we'll take our skateboards and show the dog the way to the circus.

We'll rip open the fireplace and find enough drugs and snuff films to be rich forever, and we'll stay out all day and not get the shakes even once, and we will laugh without crying and never again find punctuation in our cereal.

When the dog learns the trapeze trick, we will have been long gone, and our mouths will be empty in the mornings, always, and I will at last know what to do with your name;

I will hold it to my lips and watch the letters dissolve into the light of dawn, speeding from my fingers as I speak them, to find you, wherever you have gone.

For now, we return to the stacks of furniture and wait until it is dark, finding constellations in the streetlights of the city far from us, watching the satellites blinking silently above. We sit quietly as our sweat evaporates with the slow breathing of the city sleeping and pick out the lights of the buildings we will see, the streets we will

walk down, the places we will sleep. We will climb down and walk home, and the future will come.

