

All Gone

Jennifer Mckenny (2022)

If the world ended in an hour, would I be happy with what I'd accomplished? Could I die tomorrow knowing I tried my hardest to make the world a better place? Could I look at the people around me and be glad they are the last people I will ever see?

These are the questions she asks herself as she lays on her back, staring at the blood red sky as lumps of rock and dirt the size of boulders fall around her. It's a miracle she hasn't been hit, but there's still time. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees her home crushed by another lump.

Her whole neighbourhood is destroyed now. Her street lasted the longest. She drags her arm off her stomach and rests it beside her, the shock of cool liquid sending tingles up her arm, which mildly alarms her. Her body hasn't reacted to anything for days. Her head is heavy and full of cotton, but she rolls it to the side, searching for the source of those annoying tingles—

Oh.

That explains it.

The cool liquid is a puddle of blood, reflecting the sky. Or maybe the sky is reflecting the blood?

Her best friend, Aiden, lies beside her—or, rather, the top half of her best friend lies beside her. His glazed eyes stare at her, reminding her of the zombies in those movies they used to watch. She really hopes he doesn't turn into one. With the way the world is going, who knows what's next? Zombies wouldn't be so strange, not after what she's seen these last few days.

She doesn't know when Aiden was dumped there; he could have been there for days. Everything has been a blur since the beginning of the chaos. She turns from him, refusing to stare into his dead eyes any longer. The sigh she releases is loud and drawn out, but with no one around to hear it, she doesn't care how impolite it is.

She returns her arm to her stomach, ignoring the faint stab of pain and the squelching of exposed organs. It won't matter for much longer anyway. She sits up, and the dizziness renders her blind for a moment. She blinks until her sight comes back. When it does, she sways with shock. There's a person standing at the end of the street. She hasn't seen anyone in *days*.

With an unexpected bout of determination, she hugs her stomach and stands. She needs to get to them. She lurches down the street, gaze focused on the ground in an effort to stay upright. When she looks up, her breath stutters. They are only a few metres away.

She steps forward, but her legs collapse beneath her, sending her to the ground in an ungraceful tumble. She lays there, dazed, until the person makes a small noise. The sound is familiar, and she clumsily rolls over to face them, ignoring the way her organs scrape the bitumen.

When she sees the person, her face crumbles. Her shout rings out across the empty street. 'Dad!'

Her father turns to face her, blank eyes frightening, but he shakes himself and stumbles over to her. She cries in relief when his arms embrace her. Her stomach screams in protest, but she's too happy to care. His shirt is soon soaked, but neither of them notices, too caught up in their reunion. Her father kisses her head and rubs his thumbs over her cheeks, wiping her tears.

'Thank god, Anita. I thought you were dead,' he whispers in her ear. The chaos around them almost drowns out his words. 'I'm so proud of you, my beautiful girl. You're so strong.'

His words triggered another wave of tears, but she manages to blubber out an explanation of what she had experienced. Her father pulls her into his arms again, comforting her the best he can. His back is harder than she remembers, but she shakes the thought off. She hides in his embrace, pretending for a moment that they were back home, that everything was normal. But the moment is shattered with his next words.

'Oh, my darling girl. It's just us now. You and me against the world.'

Everything fades into the background, her ringing ears muffling his voice.

'What do you mean? Where's Mum? Where's Addy and Simon? Don't forget about them. They're here too, Dad.'

Where has all the air gone? Her breathing speeds up, but she can't get enough air. His mouth is moving, forming words that she can't hear. Words that she doesn't want to hear. He stops and looks at her for a moment. He must find something in her face because he takes her by the shoulders and shakes her. She's limp in his arms, flopping around like a ragdoll. Eventually, noise filters in.

'Anita? Anita, can you hear me? Anita? Come on, darling, come back,' her father says.

She looks up at him, and he gifts her with a wobbly smile. He leads her through a breathing exercise until her breathing is normal again. Once he's made sure that she's okay, he explains what happened.

'Your mum waited on the veranda for you when all of this—' he gestures to the rocks and the crimson sky, '—started. Your brother and sister and I made it to the bunker, but your mum refused to come. Stubborn until the end. Just like you, darling.'

She processes that for a moment, then she asks, 'And Addy and Simon? They made it, right?' She despises the hesitancy in her voice.

Her heart sinks to the bottom of her feet when her father shakes his head, tears leaving streaks in the dirt smearing his face. 'They ran out to join your mother when I turned my back. They're gone, Anita.'

They're silent, before she hears a heart wrenching sob. It takes a moment before she realises it's her sobbing. Her father hugs her, crying too.

She barely hears his whisper over their grieving, but she shuts him down fast. 'No, dad. You can't. I need you; you can't die. Please, don't say that. Why would you *say* that?' She grabs at his shirt, the fabric tearing in her fists.

He unfurls her fingers, kissing each one. 'I'm sorry, Anita. I'm sorry.' He shakes his head. 'I wasn't thinking. It's fine, we're together. Breathe, darling. I won't say it again.'

She breathes in his scent, trying to absorb it into her soul. He can't leave her. She doesn't want to be alone. They stay that way for a long time, wrapped in each other's arms. But their moment of comfort is interrupted by an explosion of dirt and bitumen only a few metres away. Her father rocks onto his feet and wipes his knees before standing. He holds out a hand and pulls her up with him. Her stomach, which she had forgotten about during the reunion, cripples her. She folds in half, holding her bleeding stomach, shallow breathing. She feels hands on her and flinches away.

'Honey, what's wrong? Anita?'

She lifts her face, hoping he can make the pain *stop*.

He steps back in shock before dropping to his knees once again. He carefully pulls her down with him, rocking her back and forth.

'Oh darling, Anita, my daughter. I'm so sorry. I should have noticed.' He wipes her sweaty forehead with a dirty sleeve. 'I guess we can go together now.'

She looks up at him, her eyebrows furrowed. His smile is sad as he moves her off his lap, revealing his back and the huge rock embedded in it. She gasps and reaches out. When she feels the cool, jagged edges of the rock, she cries out in horror.

‘Anita, it okay. It doesn’t even hurt anymore. We’ll be leaving soon, so it doesn’t matter,’ he says, trying to comfort her. ‘We’ll be happier, and you won’t be in pain. You’ll even get to see your mum and Addy and Simon again. Don’t you want that?’

She nods and flinches as another spike of pain hits her. Her father rubs her arm and lifts her back onto his lap, away from all the dirt and pooling blood. They lay down together, her father acting as a mattress.

She’s scared and worried and has no idea what’s happening, but her father is here. He’ll protect her. They lay, not moving, as their hearts slows, as their breaths become shallower, and their vision dims. They stay together.

She barely registers the loss of her father’s heartbeat.

She can no longer feel the burning pain.

She blinks and is shocked when she can see again. Her father reaches out his hand, and she is reminded of before, when they tried to get up. This time, she grabs it, and doesn’t feel the crippling pain. She stands tall and smiles at her father. He nods his head to something behind her. When she turns, she’s delighted to see her siblings, pulling on their mother’s arms. She runs forward, dodging the piles of rock and dirt and leaps into their arms. They tumble down into a pile, laughing and hugging and smiling.

She feels a pinch on her leg and pulls Aiden into the pile too. Her father stands back, grinning at them. They stay there, together, forgetting the pain and heartbreak.

It turns out none of those things—no accomplishments, no positive actions, no *people*—matter when there’s no one left them to care.

Brown language lily
Marriage stress sleep
Moon cycle running
Beach turtle lovey-dovey
Annoyed baby loose
Tissue sick swickers
Boyfriend death soulmates
Paper crying water
Whale picture dress
Glasses tight hard
Much tired observe
Whiskey mum cut
Unicorn sister bored
Fantasy sore head