

Radiation

By Kathleen McGill

Their hats were made of fur; their cheeks pink and their eyes squinted against the cold. The sun shone down brightly, too brightly, on their glossy picture. The glare made it hard to see, unless you looked at it just right or wore sunglasses.

I had taken my sunglasses off, though, and let the glare of the page reflect up into my face, dazzling my eyes. I imagined the explosion the article talked about- the light, the cloud and sound and then the silence. I put my hands up over my eyes and saw the bones right through; the five white bones of my palms stood out against the shadow of my flesh. Then whispers, whispers that were hard and urgent. Whispers, then screams.

I uncovered my eyes quickly and looked around to see if anyone was watching. Nope. No one around. I lay down and closed my eyes again. All I saw was the swimming pink of the insides of my lids. No Russians were screaming from radiation burns.

The grinding wheeze of my Mom's minivan sounded her return. I yanked my shirt on and finished buttoning my shorts as I ran to the back door. I was wearing my sister's new bikini and had to manage a quick change once inside. My mom and sister were talking as they unloaded the groceries from the van. I wiggled out of the top underneath my shirt. After another maneuver I was out of the bottoms, too, and up the stairs to put them back in her drawer. The tags were still on and had left a red splotch on my back where the plastic dug into my skin.

The front door swung open and they walked in, both carrying brown paper bags full of food.

"Hey Roch, would you mind getting the last of the groceries?" my Mom called.

They walked into the kitchen and plunked the bags down on the counter.

"Sure," I answered and casually walked down the stairs and out the front door.

There was only one bag for me to carry. It had bananas, bread, peanut butter and maxi pads in it.

I brought it in and laid it on the counter next to the other bags. My sister, Evelyn, reached in and took the maxi pads, giving me a look as she did. She was only three years older, but acted like a second mother. Evelyn sauntered into the bathroom and shut the door. I could hear the rip of the plastic as she opened the bag.

"So what'd you do when we were gone?" asked Mom.

I shrugged and put away some apples,

"Some reading."

"Oh yeah? What?"

"National Geographic. The new one came yesterday."

Mom nodded and folded up an empty bag. She had gotten me that subscription instead of the one I asked for, Rolling Stone.

"You know," I said, "it's not exactly a kids' magazine. There are dead people in it."

Raising her eyes with amusement she answered,

"Well, I'd rather you see dead people than half naked models in liquor ads."

"Mom, that makes no sense. Especially when you got Evelyn Seventeen," I knew I was whining, "those girls are practically naked and all it talks about is sex. And the 'embarrassing stories' are the worst. You know they're all made up."

"So, it would be a better magazine without the embarrassing stories?"

"The whole thing is stupid."

I crossed my arms in front of my flat chest.

Evelyn came in looking smug. She did that a lot when she had her period. When I got mine she'd have to stop acting so "mature."

"So what did you learn today, Ms. Ranger Rick," she asked, jutting out a hip, and shooting a glance at my magazine.

"Well," I answered, "what about you? You learn how to insert a tampon properly or what to do if your boyfriend pressures you for sex?"

Evelyn rolled her eyes, then scrunched up her nose and pushed back imaginary glasses. It was her "dweeb" move and essentially meant that I won. She had no other come back. I continued in a mock adult voice-- authoritative, but concerned,

"Because if he loves you, he'll wait."

"Oh, shut up!"

She spun around on her heels and headed towards the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"That's true, you know," my Mom said after the door to Evelyn's room clicked shut.

"What's true? The waiting thing? I know, Mom-- we don't have to talk about it."

"Good."

She finished putting away the last of the groceries.

"You want a Popsicle? I got some watermelon ones today."

"Sure, yeah. That sounds good. Thanks."

Mom opened the freezer and pulled out two fluorescent pink pops. They had seeds in them for authenticity.

"You would think," Mom said as she pulled off the wrapper, "that they would leave the seeds out."

I nodded and sunk my teeth into the pop feeling the coldness shoot up into my gums. Mom looked like she disapproved, but didn't say anything. I crunched the flavored ice quickly, to make it melt faster. A seed got stuck in my tooth and I wiggled it out with my tongue, slipping it up between my cheek and top gum. When I dissolved the chunk, I moved the seed into position and fired. Right at my mom.

"That's why they keep them in," I giggled.

It had landed on the counter only about a foot away from me, entirely missing my target.

"Gross. Don't leave that there."

She pointed at the seed and then walked out the backdoor to the patio.

I finished the rest of my pop slowly, staring at the black dot on the counter.

The dot became an ember being extinguished by the snow that surrounded it. Fall out from the blast. The sky was full of chunks of houses, forests. Farm animals. Not from the center of the blast, of course, but the edges where the radiation wasn't strong enough to dematerialize everything.

The ember released a last wraith of smoke; the spirit of whatever it used to be. I don't think even a nuclear bomb can extinguish that. It's probably like cremation, but Mom says those people can't be raised up when the Day comes. Maybe God will make an exception and work that out somehow.

I looked up from the seed and saw my sister watching me.

"You're so weird, I swear."

Evelyn shook her head, walked over and flicked the seed into the trash.

"Why were you staring like that?"

"I was just thinking."

"About what?"

She sounded critical.

"Russia."

Evelyn narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, stating,

"You're never going to make it."

We stared each other down until we both got tired of it. She left and flopped down on the couch, switching on the TV from the remote.

That was Evelyn's usual line and I think she really believed it. I had heard it enough to not need to defend myself. It was easier to just let it pass. By "make it," she meant high school and the world. She was probably right, but I didn't worry about it much.

I looked over her slightly chubby body. Evelyn called it her baby fat and hated it with a passion I usually reserved for slugs. I smirked quietly, remembering the mad bikini dash I had made--so far undetected.

Mom had finished her Popsicle and was gnawing on the wooden stick. I walked outside to join her, bringing my magazine.

"Eck, I hate the taste of the wood. How can you do that?"

"Oh, I guess I just don't pay attention to it," Mom answered.

"Evelyn's wrong-- you're the weird one."

"Maybe so, but you run a close second."

We smiled at each other. I could see a lot of myself in her, the gray eyes, dirty blonde hair and the gap between our two front teeth. I'm going to get braces to fix mine.

"What're you reading about?"

I sighed.

"The Russian government tested an atomic bomb up near Siberia in the fifties. They told the survivors that a UFO had crashed near their village. Nobody talked about until recently."

I opened up the magazine to the pictures of the Russians in their fur coats, hats and boots. They were pointing at what the blast had done to their homes and property with a detached look. On another page, though, children with radiation burns were wide eyed as deep-sea fish brought up to the surface of the ocean. I could imagine them making the same kind of gulping noises as those fish struggling for breath. One of the children shared an examination table with an adult who looked dead.

"Awful," was all Mom could manage as she leafed through the pages.

She closed the magazine and laid it on the ground. I put my head on her shoulder and she stroked my hair, gently pulling out some of the tangles.

Twenty minutes passed in silence before she spoke again,

"Hon, I'm gonna go start dinner."

"Okay."

She got up and went inside. I lay down on the towel I used before and rolled up my shirt to expose my belly to the sun. The grass was yellow from the drought and even through the towel it was sharp and brittle under my back. If I turned my head to the right, I could see the Salem Nuclear Power Plant in the distance. Against the flatness of the land, it stood out like a potter's huge imperfect vase, framed in my view by a farmhouse and a Presbyterian Church. The steam cloud rose a mile high and bowed over at the top of the column.

My neighborhood was close enough to the Plant that along our roads there were large signs with huge sirens attached, alerting us that if we heard them go off, tune our radios to AM 1530 and do not panic. Right. I sometimes wake up to my alarm clock thinking that the Plant's had a meltdown. Both my neighbors work there and have brought their daughters for a tour. I was invited but refused. I get enough peacetime radiation right here.

I filled my lungs deep with air and sighed loudly. Maybe my sister was right, maybe I wouldn't make it after all.

I pulled myself in the "fish" pose, one of the yoga moves my mom taught me. The Plant was upside down when I looked at it now. Somehow it looked more natural that way.