



unsilent heart

conrad walters

"A gripping speculative story full of sharp humor, zany imagination, and offbeat characters." —**Debra Adelaide**, author of *The Household Guide to Dying*

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*For Joyce, whom I love more than
any speculative wife ever imagined.*

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DENIAL

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Maybe I worry too much. But beside me, my phone sat on death row with a lightning bolt of fractured glass and little hope of a pardon. Outside the kitchen window, magpies swooped with vengeful, clacking beaks. Twenty minutes away, my grandfather's body shriveled by the week except for an overripe plum that fed on his liver. And in places unknown were girls named Ellie.

Or maybe everyone behaved this way and worried until the moment they couldn't. Like Mum, who fretted over a visit to the hospital on that normal morning, our last before we confronted death as no one ever had. Or Dad, who cursed a cryptic crossword full of morbid clues, while I struggled with an assignment that would haunt me for a week.

I was supposed to write my obituary for English class, but I couldn't find anything worth saying.

Nick Hartford, who achieved nothing of note in sixteen years, died on Tuesday after being hit by an Uber Eats driver while watching Taylor Swift memes on TikTok. He might be missed by Bowie, his border collie.

That was sure to dazzle Ms. Bellinger.

Mum fixed me in a stare. "Don't be late for school again."

Dad spun a pencil around his thumb in a yellow blur. "Nine letters for *Death of a company official*. Starts with e-x."

Mum wanted to be with her dad, Grandpa Tom, for some medical appointment, but she had a conference to run and doubted she could drive across town during lunch and return before the afternoon session began. She's a nervous driver, always asking me to recheck the blind spot, as if refrigerators

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might plummet from the sky and find her no matter which lane she chose.

Dad counted letters on his fingers and chuckled. “*Execution.*”

Lately, Mum had been visiting Grandpa Tom a lot, sitting beside him with Grandma Lillian while he underwent chemo for liver cancer. Over dinner, she would update us and speak of the cancer being in stages, as if his tumors were costumed dancers performing a primitive ritual inside his body.

The last time I saw him was at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital three weeks ago. The whites of his eyes were yolky like runny eggs, and the flesh of his legs dented like gray putty. After a few minutes, Mum, Dad, and Grandma Lillian went out. They said they were getting coffees, but I knew it didn’t take three people to carry a few paper cups.

Once the sound of their footsteps had faded, Grandpa Tom asked if I could do something for him.

“Of course,” I said. “Anything.”

He pointed at a bleeping monitor. “Shut that thing up, will you?”

I stepped toward the machine. I’d hoped to find a mute button, but all I saw were squiggly lines and numbers.

I didn’t want to fail him, though, so I kept looking for a long time.

“What are you doing?” The monitor registered an impatient spike. “Found it?”

“Nearly,” I said, tracing the sides, bottom, and back of the screen.

“Just press everything and see what happens.” (I saw where Mum got her approach to solving tech problems.)

I opened my phone and asked AI how to adjust the model number. It confidently replied, but I didn’t trust the answer.

“I’m not sure we should be messing with this,” I said. “I

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think the top line is for your heart, but I don't know what all these numbers mean. They're probably important."

"Maybe. I don't care anymore. That thing's only there to prevent me from getting some sleep," he said. "Unplug it."

I smiled. I thought he was joking, but he wasn't.

"Turn it off, Nick... Before they come back... Please."

I stood frozen, mesmerized by the lines that sped across the screen in some unending race. I didn't want to disappoint him, but I feared disabling the monitor might harm him. I didn't want to be the person responsible for that. I couldn't do what he'd asked, and I couldn't admit it to him. Or myself.

But he knew anyway. He reached for my hand and held it with a feeble grip. We stayed like that for most of a minute before he spoke again.

"I shouldn't have asked you to do that," he said.

"That's okay."

"It's just been ... It's been a bad day." He sounded like his chest had run out of air. "I've had enough."

"Enough what?"

"Enough everything."

I said I understood, even though I didn't think I really did.

We stayed like that, quietly listening to the monitor's tone-deaf beeps, before he managed to speak again. "Don't tell your grandmother or parents about this, okay? Ever."

"All right," I vowed.

When they got back, coffees in hand, Grandpa Tom looked me in the eye as a reminder of my promise.

Back in the kitchen, Mum leaned across the table. "Nick, you're going to miss your bus."

Dad's pencil circled his thumb again. "*A natural killer disturbed in the act*, three letters."

"Cat," he announced as he wrote the answer.

Since May, Mum had been recording Grandpa Tom's locations on the kitchen calendar: *home, hospital, home, hospital*.

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Whenever she returned from seeing him, her eyes were puffy and red, and she shuffled along like Andy Mason, a supersmart kid at my school who clomps around in orthopedic shoes because his legs were mangled in a car accident.

I wished I could help Grandpa Tom (and Mum), but Year 10 students don't discover many medical breakthroughs, so I mostly just tried to keep her spirits up. Grandpa Tom had done everything the doctors had asked and never missed a treatment. So, his trip to the hospital that day seemed like it might be something to celebrate.

"If you miss your bus," Mum said, "I can't drive you to school today."

Dad looked up. "Did you miss the bus again?"

"Nick!"

I grabbed my schoolbag, shouted "bye" and rushed out the front door. I heard the bus gun its engine to climb Heartbreak Hill, which meets the eastern end of our street. I'd never make it unless I ran west and caught the bus after it turned onto Morgan Street and coasted back down the hill.

I took a breath and sprinted. The wind blurred my sight, but I noticed the front door of a house nine or ten properties from where I live, on the opposite side of our street, was wide open, like the owner was trying to air out some rotting stench. But no one was around. I saw only the black of an empty hallway before I cut up a side street. Then, with a swerve to the left, I cut through a deserted lane, hurdling over recycling bins. I caught the bus just as it arrived. Yes, I said to myself, confident a good day lay ahead.

The bus was crowded with men whose ties were lassoed around razor-burnt necks, and perfume-soaked women with puffy ankles. I stood and retrieved my phone from my front pants pocket to check an app called You Dob You Die. Maybe "app" is a bit grand. It's just a feed of school gossip made by a student who's a coding wizard. I read the latest post—*Sienna*

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Cartwright from Year 11 experienced a fetal error after her boyfriend's condom broke—and shook my head. Poor Sienna.

The only other notification on the phone was a text from my classmate James.

The Rapture... with four exclamation marks.

My eyes rolled up to the grime-coated ceiling of the bus. As penance for admitting I couldn't stand his music, James had been texting me the names of Christian rock bands for days. Each group was fronted by a sweaty Jesus look-alike clutching a microphone with both hands, blood vessels set to burst with each strangled note. I didn't click the link James sent for *The Rapture!!!!* Four exclamation marks was five more than I could bear.

Across from me, a gray-haired woman was in tears staring at her phone, although I didn't know if she was happy or sad. I couldn't see the screen, but I saw her chest convulse as she gulped for air. Like someone had forced her to watch a video for *The Rapture!!!!*

She turned to the hipster in headphones seated beside her, apologetic for the intrusion, and held out her phone. He hesitated, confused, then looked. His eyes widened, and he stroked his bird's nest of a beard. They shared an astonished look, then retreated into their private worlds, strangers again by the time the bus slowed for my stop.

I was later than ideal, but still early enough to catch up with friends before class. James, in a peach-colored shirt, and Kieran, with a baseball cap turned low and backwards, were in our usual spot under the camphor laurel tree, arguing. It's what they do.

I've known them both since primary school. In Year 4, James grew until he was the tallest kid in our class. His ears kept going higher and higher like sunflowers, but his embarrassed shoulders stayed humble and low with us. He's the opposite of Kieran, who looks like he's permanently wearing

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a puffer jacket. I wouldn't call Kieran fat, but if the three of us were stranded on a desert island, he'd survive the longest.

"It's just temporary," Kieran was saying. "There's a backlog, like when everyone used to preorder the same release at EB Games and you had to wait for a new shipment."

"We're talking about lives, not PlayStation orders." James sounded like he was explaining climate change to his cat. "Ever heard of statistics?"

Unusually, Kieran ignored the taunt. "Be patient. Heaps of people will die soon enough. It's only been a couple of hours."

"A couple? More like four."

I dropped my schoolbag and sat alongside them. "Eleven hours, actually."

They both went quiet, surprised by whatever I had unwittingly said. But I was just stirring. "What are we talking about?"

"The Rapture," James said.

Kieran pointed a dismissive thumb at James. "Holy Boy here thinks the Bilpin guy is proof that God is about to save his homeboys."

"Those who accept Him will live forever." James attends Catholic church services every Sunday. He doesn't usually talk religious stuff with us, but nothing was holding him back that day. "It's the Bible's promise."

"The only promise is that you're gonna look like an idiot."

"Me? You're the doofus who doesn't think doctors can tell if someone's dead."

That's when I surrendered. "What are you talking about?"

"Keep up, Nick. The Rapture. I sent you a link about Bilpin."

"There is no Rapture," Kieran corrected. "A few people in Australia haven't died. But they will."

"No," James said. "Never again."

"Bilpin?" I pleaded.

James sighed. It was punishment for not following the link in his text, but he explained everything anyway. An apple

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farmer in Bilpin had fallen under a tractor and been tilled into his orchard like fertilizer pellets. But somehow, he wasn't dead. So, it was a miracle—the Rapture. And, according to James, anyone who believed in Jesus was about to float through the clouds into heaven. Wow.

“This year's apples are gonna be extra red,” Kieran said. I winced.

James continued. “Every time I check, there are more people who ought to have been declared dead but haven't.”

I don't know where James got the number, but ordinarily, he said, nineteen Australians die every hour. So, if it was a quirk, it was a big quirk.

“We're talking about more than fifty people who've been affected so far,” James said.

“It'll average out,” Kieran said. “Just give it time.”

James considered this. “Regression to the mean? I don't think so.”

I wasn't sure what James was talking about. He's one part brainiac, one part braggart. I assumed he meant this situation wouldn't fix itself. Nor would James want it to. But if no one in the whole country was dying, did that mean everyone in Australia was worthy of heaven?

“Are these people able to move?” I asked. “Can they talk?”

Kieran guffawed. “The only thing they'd be saying is, ‘Call a mortician’.”

Then Ellie arrived, humming to herself as usual. Some kids sing like they think life is one continuous audition for *The Voice*, but Ellie doesn't even realize she's doing it. She moved from Melbourne to Sydney a few months ago. She's got blue-tinted dreadlocks that drape down her back like coarse rope, and she wears Doc Martens that she repaints each week. One week they've got flowers on them, the next it's green aliens inside UFOs. This week it was foot bones, except that the left foot was painted on the right boot and the right foot was on the left boot.

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On Ellie's first day at our school, the principal asked Alessia Pang to show her around, but I guess Alessia decided Ellie's hair was gangrenous because she ditched Ellie after ten minutes. That's when Ellie joined James, Kieran, and me. Probably she spotted James. Girls are always spotting James and his expertly ironed pastel shirts. She just walked over to our spot under the camphor laurel, looked up at the tree, inhaled, said it was beautiful and sat down. She's been sitting with us ever since.

Ellie dropped her bags on the last note of whatever she was humming and plonked down beside James, who instantly asked what she thought about nobody dying.

"I reckon it's something Ms. Bellinger planted," she said to me, "to make our obituary assignments seem more real."

That made sense. "A hoax?"

Kieran kicked James. "Told ya."

James wasn't convinced. He never is.

The bell rang. Kieran left us to sidle up between Sienna Cartwright and Caitlin Daraban. Ellie and James strolled to Chemistry. And I turned to my phone before surrendering it for the school day. Instagram and TikTok were in a frenzy, but mostly people were posting to say everyone else was posting about Bilpin like crazy. Every post said the He or She or It who had brought famine and locusts and war and disease for millennia had taken mercy on people. *Blessed mercy*. People who had believed in God all along were taking credit, saying stuff like they knew "God would not forsake His creations".

Even people who weren't religious were excited, like they'd scammed God, which is sort of how I felt. I've never hurled Banksia cones at squawky mynah birds or ignited paper bags of poo on people's porches, and I've never stabbed someone with anything bigger than a paperclip. But—and I'm not proud of it—when our school's Bully-in-Chief, Jason Bligh, fell while joyriding on top of a train carriage and never returned to

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classes, I didn't bake a cake or sell raffle tickets to raise money for his rehab. And no one in our house had attended church in years, even at Easter when Grandpa Tom and Grandma Lilian invited us. So our house wasn't exactly guaranteed a puffy white cloud with a premium Netflix plan.

I handed over my phone and watched it being added to the school graveyard, wondering, as I did every day, whether it would be there when I returned.

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I walked into the window-lined room of Art class amid sickening wafts of oil paints and turpentine. The principal's voice boomed from a loudspeaker to say that any students who were upset by "unverified reports circulating in the media today" should visit the counsellor's office. No one moved.

Ms. Argyle starts every class by showing us a famous artwork. That morning, it was a painting that had old-fashioned pocket watches drooping across a barren landscape.

"This is *The Persistence of Memory* by Salvador Dali," she said. "Thoughts?"

Everyone is always afraid of giving the wrong answer, so we had the usual contemplative silence. I stared at the painting until my eyes burned, but then I made a rookie's mistake and checked to see what everyone else was doing. Which is when Ms. Argyle called on me.

"Nick, how does the painting make you feel?"

My grip tightened around a plastic water bottle perched on my desk.

"Thirsty?" I said.

"Good. What else?"

"Tired?"

"Why?"

I looked around, desperate for someone to take pity on me and help. But every mouth was speechless from the beauty of a painting I alone didn't understand.

"Tired because ...?"

"Um, everything is hopeless and lifeless. Even the watches have given up and can't be bothered agreeing what time it is."

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And then skinny, oily-skinned Tegan Lester, who usually says nothing, shouted out in a high, squeaky voice: “It’s about how we’ve all poisoned the Earth and killed it.”

Every head in the room turned as if Tegan’s body might be floating in the air or have lasers shooting from her eyes. She pointed an accusing finger at my water bottle.

“And now,” Tegan said, on the verge of tears, “we’re all going to live forever and have to watch the planet suffer.”

Nearby chairs inched away from her.

Ms. Argyle was so stunned that she didn’t even ask why Tegan was talking like that. (Emotionally, I mean. Tegan always squeaks.)

“Yes. Well. Okay. Thanks for sharing that,” Ms. Argyle said, before instructing us to work on our main projects for the rest of the class. She stared at a phone clumsily buried in her smock for the next forty minutes and waved vaguely at the door when the bell rang.

I trudged from class to class, looking forward to English with Ellie, where I hoped Ms. Bellinger would confess to orchestrating the hoax Ellie had predicted. But Ms. Belinger only read aloud from *The Canterbury Tales*. It sounded like she was gargling alphabet soup, yet I still felt like I understood her more than what was happening around me.

At lunch, Ellie sat away from our usual spot. She was holding a trigonometry textbook and looked up as I joined her.

“Hey,” she said, “check out the equations in this book.”

I declined. She knows I hate anything to do with numbers. But she insisted. “Really. They’re amazing.”

I scooted around the table to see.

“You’ve got a—”

I couldn’t get the last word out because Ellie clamped her hand over my mouth.

“Shh.”

Hidden inside the book was a contraband phone.

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"I hardly ever bring my phone to school," she said, "so the teachers are used to me not handing one in."

Ellie showed me a stream of posts about nobody dying. The ecstasy from earlier had been replaced. People were posting about Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Shiva, the Pope, Saint This and Saint That, fine-tuning who deserved the credit for an ultra-uber-mega miracle. And the God People were challenging the atheists, who looked set to reap the rewards of everlasting life without making much of an effort, tagging their posts with #coasters.

People were also confessing past sins like they'd been waiting decades for the right time to atone. Even trolls were apologizing. Something about it was contagious, and I considered saying I was sorry about Jason Bligh. However, since I hadn't played any part in his accident and had only silently cheered his injury, I decided I could silently be sorry too.

James and Kieran sat down, and Ellie lured them around the table, James moving more readily than Kieran.

As we scrolled through post after post on Ellie's phone, I noticed countless images of double rainbows and doves in mid-flight and shafts of sunlight breaking through clouds. And so many angels I thought I'd vomit if I saw another.

Then we looked at news from overseas.

"*Bank shooting in Miami,*" Ellie whispered. "*Five confirmed dead.*"

"*Chinese bus plunges into ravine,*" James said. "*Fifteen killed.*"

"*Fatalities climb after Nepali avalanche,*" Kieran said.

In the absence of official pronouncements about *what* could die, people had sought the answers for themselves. It started with posts of lettuce, dried out like lacey fans of coral, then mosquito larvae boiled on stovetops, then worms dug from compost heaps and sentenced to writhe across expanses of asphalt.

Tuesday was Massacre Day for critters. Why anyone

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thought they needed to share images of roasted geckos and belly-up goldfish, I can't say. Fortunately, none of the gruesome images showed anything bigger than a lizard, although I wondered if that meant larger animals, maybe all mammals in Australia, were also now immune from death.

While we madly scrolled for information, a cockroach crept along the tabletop, lured by scraps of tuna casserole, and Kieran slammed a round takeaway carton over it. As it raced round and round the plastic prison, Kieran sealed its tomb by slipping a lid underneath. When he stood up with his prize, his hands pincerd on opposite sides of the lid, I assumed he was taking it outside. But he bolted toward the kitchen.

"Kieran," I yelled, "you're going the wrong way."

Ellie, James and I chased after him until he stopped, breathless beside the canteen's microwave ovens.

"Maybe it'll explode," Kieran said. "And I can use Ellie's phone to get a pic for my Insta account."

I tried to talk him down. "There's mountains of dead stuff online already."

Ignoring me, he shoved the container into a microwave, set the timer for thirty seconds and pressed Start. The interior light came on, and we watched the tray spin clockwise while the cockroach crawled anticlockwise to stay in view and beg us for mercy. When the oven's bell rang and the light went out, we stared at the dark window for a moment before Kieran opened the latch.

I expected to see the cockroach on its back with six hairy legs curled into its body. Instead, the antennae flicked around the edge of the plastic in the hunt for an escape. Kieran took out the plastic cup and held it at eye level to peer inside, like an omnipotent being.

"Cockroaches are resistant to microwaves," James announced.

Kieran gave him a look.

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“Come on,” I said, “anything desperate enough to eat canteen food deserves pity.”

Either guilt or my persuasiveness convinced him. He opened the lid and set the cockroach free. The last we saw, the poor thing was skittering back to the lunchroom.

As we headed back ourselves, we came face to face with Mr. Hamlin, the swim coach. He stood with his hands on his hips. “Phone,” he demanded.

A sheepish Ellie surrendered it without comment.

Hamlin glared at the four of us. “I trust none of you will repeat this mistake.”

We summoned enough contrition to be allowed past him.

For the day’s last class, we were meant to have a Science test. But instead, we got Mr. Steiner talking about nobody dying as if he alone could be trusted to mansplain it sufficiently.

“All species, humans among them, have been evolving since the first amoebae extended and retracted their pseudopods to move around and ingest food.”

Meaning he made it so boring that it put everyone at ease. We nodded like we couldn’t get enough and why hadn’t he told us this amazing stuff before—until it was too late for the test. And even then, he seemed determined to go on forever.

“If there’s one thing we’ve learned in four hundred million years, it’s that evolution never stops. So, unless humans are going to stop evolving, there has to be another explanation for any interruption to death. We just don’t know yet what it is,” he said, trying to talk over the bell and the commotion as we left.

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On the bus ride home, I stood up for a pregnant woman who was loaded down with shopping. I had to hold an overhead strap beside a giant in a sleeveless shirt. I was wedged in so closely that all I could see was his blubbery armpit. Every sweaty pore sprouted a damp, black hair.

I turned away, but the only other option was to stare into the chasm between two watermelon bosoms like a pervert. Before I swung back around, I took a deep breath that I hoped would last for the five minutes until my stop.

I reached into my front left pocket for my phone and its promise of a distraction.

The phone wasn't there. But it had to be. I frisked myself, checking every pocket—nothing. I checked each dark cavity of my backpack. Still nothing.

In a panic, I shouted out: "Everybody freeze!"

The bus halted for its next stop, and passengers jostled past me.

"Come on," I said. "Nobody move. My phone's gone."

Mr. Sweaty peered down. "And that's our problem because ...?"

The bus jerked forward, nearly sending me into the wall of armpit. Mr. Sweaty glared at the intrusion into his personal space.

"My phone's just been stolen," I said.

"So?"

I explained that I'd paid my bus fare with the phone, so it had to be there.

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“Look, you little armpit sniffer, no one cares about your phone.”

I looked up at him from around his damp armpit. “Maybe that’s the problem,” I said. “Nobody cares about anyone else anymore.”

I was waiting to hear what selfish reply he’d come up with when the pregnant woman tapped my hip.

“Is that it? Just there,” she said, pointing to the floor behind Mr. Sweaty.

I bent down and squeezed past him to pick up the trampled phone. The front had its familiar crack on one corner. I turned it over. Now the back was cracked and scratched as well.

“Is it yours?” the woman said.

“Yes. Mostly.”

Mr. Sweaty lifted his eyes to the heavens. “Oh, sweet baby Jesus! It’s a Christmas miracle.”

I bent under his blubber to check for landmarks outside, then signaled for the driver to stop.

“Excuse me,” I said into the armpit, like I was determined to be polite in spite of his behavior. “I usually get off at the stop after this one. But you’ve reminded me that I need to do something nice for another human being.”

“Still not caring,” Mr. Sweaty said.

When the bus stopped, I pushed past Mr. Sweaty more vigorously than necessary.

I retraced the back-alley route I’d taken that morning, determined to counter the karmic selfishness of Mr. Sweaty, vowing to check on the house I had ignored in haste, determined to do a good deed but secretly hoping that nothing was needed.

Soon enough, I found myself across from the property. The lawn was a victim of the drought, and headless agapanthus stalks jutted up along the fence line. A rope from a long-abandoned swing dangled like an empty noose from the

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only tree. Granite pavers, laid like flattened headstones, led to the entrance.

And the door was still ajar.

I thought I recalled seeing an old man gardening there sometimes, but I couldn't be sure. I crossed the street and squinted, edging as close as I dared without looking like the robber I suspected could be inside.

I was lost in thought, debating how to proceed, when the blare of a car horn startled me. It was Mum, who lowered the passenger window.

"I'm going for groceries," she said. "I could use some muscle."

I got in the car, expecting her to interrogate me about why I was staring at someone else's house. Instead, she asked if I'd heard "anything unusual" at school.

"Like nobody dying?"

"Yeah, that."

When we reached a roundabout, she came to a halt even though there was no traffic. "I don't want you to worry," she said. "Dad and I will keep you safe."

Which seemed odd, because if nobody could die, why did anyone need to be kept safe from anything? As I tried to make sense of it, my phone went crazy, playing three different notifications, kind of a mini-concert, though not in tune. We both looked at it, and I put it on mute because I thought it might help Mum relax.

She pulled into the shopping center and drove around playing Parking Lot Tetris until she found a spot just as it became vacant.

"Dead men's shoes," she said, then frowned, then laughed a helium giggle. As we walked toward the entrance to Coles, she tried to distract me whenever we passed someone balancing a fountain's worth of bottled water on their shoulder

or hauling tents and lanterns and survivalist crud from the camping store.

“Any requests for dinner, sweetie?”

My first thought was pizza. But if nothing bigger than a lizard ever died again, we could be doomed to weeks, if not decades, of tofu. “Steak?”

“Perfect,” she said, although I think she would have said that no matter what. *Why yes, let’s have curried Brussels sprouts, and a stinky mound of durian for dessert.*

Inside the store, the usual tinkling piano music leached from the ceiling. It was busier than normal, except that people were mostly grabbing batteries and canned goods instead of discounted cake mix and home-brand cling wrap. Mum hurried us to the meat aisle and threw a tray of rib-eye cuts into our trolley, then another, and another.

“My goodness,” she said, “they just look so delicious.”

Elsewhere, some of the shelves were depleted, which wasn’t a surprise. A guy with scuffed work boots was using his tattooed forearm to herd tinned soups into his trolley. He did the same with those packet noodles that come with individual sachets of flavoring. I occasionally eat the sachets on their own when I make my lunch, so I smiled at him. I understood. But he glared at me, then gripped his trolley with hairy knuckles and cursed one wheel that kept pulling to the left.

We saw him again at the checkout, lining up his army of soldiers in Campbell’s soup body armor. When he dropped the little plastic divider behind his platoon, he eyed me with a look that said, “Don’t even *think* about touching my noodles.”

Normally, that would be enough to make me stretch a lazy arm over the grocery store no-man’s-land, like when your arm accidentally falls behind a girl’s seat at the movies and resurfaces so close to her shoulder that you’re almost touching. But Mum interrupted with a light tug on my shirt.

“Bit of help?” She was unloading our trolley. We had even

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more meat than I realized, plus other groceries she'd added along the way.

"Sure you've got enough powdered milk?" It looked like she was going to build a 3-D model of the Himalayas.

Mum picked up the nearest package, pulled her glasses down from her head, and studied the expiry date. "Yeah, it's okay. That'll keep just fine and dandy."

I'd never heard anyone outside of English class say "dandy" before. It seemed like a word that had died in a previous century.

Monique Dutton from down the street cruised into view. She had a leather handbag on her shoulder, a string of purple beads around her neck and half a kilo of mascara weighing down her eyelids. Her fingers fidgeted up the beads and back down.

"Cath Hartford!" She said it like she and Mum hadn't seen one another since primary school. Then she looked at me, all enthused, as if deciding whether to pinch my cheeks.

"Hi, Nicky," she said, prompting a wince from Mum. "Lovely weather, isn't it?"

Her trolley overflowed with four-ply toilet paper, held in place by one spread-eagled hand.

"Yes. Makes a nice change," Mum said while unloading items faster and faster, as though our trolley might refill itself if she paused. "Lovely to see you," Mum said, as much to a bag of rice as to Mrs. Dutton, who was already escaping toward a blue pyramid of fabric softener.

I looked at the checkout girl, hoping for a sign of whether what I was witnessing was weird or a new normal, but all she did was ask if we had FlyBuys. Maybe the checkout girl hadn't heard about #coasters. Maybe if you were subjected to eight hours a day of supermarket radio, you learned to blot out everything except the words "price check".

And then, for the first time, I felt this tiny, tiny flicker of

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fear. When I thought everybody knew Death might have died, somehow it was okay. Whatever lay ahead we'd tackle together. We've defeated Godzilla, we've repelled aliens, we've blown up comets hurtling toward our planet. Okay, those were movies, but they prove that when we unite, Earthlings are undefeatable. Now I was beginning to think there was something else. Not that I could be stuck forever with people like the checkout girl on autopilot because, honestly, I had wrestled with those thoughts before. This was more like a fear that we no longer knew what anything meant, what lay ahead.

I looked at Mum, at her smile and how her freckled hand trembled as she retrieved her credit card and rubbed a thumb over its security chip, as if the gesture might bring good luck. Did we need it? I piled our bags and bags of groceries into our trolley.

"Have a nice day," the checkout girl said.

"Okay," I said, but I suspected it was a promise I might not be able to keep.