

Awful Sound
David Kummer

They sat on a small bench, overlooking the river that sparkled with sunlight. The orb of light itself was sinking beneath a hill in the distance. She turned to him, both of them older in years than she'd ever expected. A small tear fell from her eye, landing on their hands, clasped tightly together.

"Do you ever think about going back?" he asked, focused on the water bubbling past. His eyes were foggy, attention far away, somewhere past those hills and the sinking sun.

"I've thought about the houses," she said, "but never going back."

He nodded. After a moment of hesitation, he ate the words that had almost slipped out.

"I wish I remembered when we met." She leaned her head on his shoulder and held his one hand with both of hers. "That'd be a nice story to tell. If only we had someone who wanted to know."

"I want to know," he said. "Maybe we can make up a story. Pretend that it's real."

She grinned and kissed his thin beard. "I'd like that, I think."

They sat there for minutes after, watching as a group of boys skipped stones across the river's surface. When they were gone, the whole area took on an eerie silence. The cars behind them were too sparse and too far to interrupt their peace of mind. The weather was perfect, a slight breeze, just as it had been on that night long ago. Far away. In the dark.

Without warning, he squeezed her hand tightly, nails cutting into her skin. She jerked to face him, bringing her free hand up to his head. Tears fell freely, staining his shirt.

"What happened?" She raised his chin to see into his eyes, her own full of concern. "Are you okay?"

"That... sound." He clenched his teeth and his eyes focused on something past her shoulder. "That sound... again."

-----Y ears Ag o-----

Eudocia
Oren

Eudocia knocked on the window, brushing hair behind her ear. She stood on the wet grass, shifting from side to side, uncomfortably aware of her white sneakers in the green hazzard. The curtains finally swung to the side and Oren grinned at her. He unlatched the window and helped her climb inside, this time without scraping any knees or elbows.

"I think we're getting better at that," she whispered, taking her shoes off and setting them by the closet.

"I think so too." He locked the window again and drew the curtains. Eudocia had fallen onto her back, stretched out on the bed as far as possible. She gave him a wry smile. "Can you make some room?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

There were footsteps in the hallway and they snapped in that direction. Thankfully, they passed, and Eudocia moved over on the bed. The moment of suspense had ruined the joke.

"Sorry it took me so long to get here," she said. "Parents and stuff."

He nodded and spread out on the bed next to her. "It's alright." Without a second thought, he pulled out his phone and a pair of headphones. "Music?"

"Absolutely."

They held hands while he started an album and felt themselves fade into the mattress. Oren glanced over from time to time, checking that she was still comfortable. Her hair was blonde now, different than the day before. He'd learned that it was pointless to ask why. The answer wasn't something definite.

"I like your hair," he commented.

She grinned and blushed slightly. "Thanks. I do too for now. I'm kinda worried what people are gonna say at school on Monday."

"Don't worry about that." He propped himself up on one elbow, keeping eye contact. Somebody had once told him that was important for "comforting people."

She sighed and kept her gaze on the ceiling, not reacting to his shift in position. "Easy for you to say. You've had the same hair for something like six years."

"Well, I think you look great. And we have a three-day weekend. So plenty of time before people will see."

She shook her head but a smile crept across her face. "Thanks, that makes me feel so much better."

Oren faltered. "I mean... It looked good when it was blonde five months ago or whenever."

"Technically that was brownish blonde, but I get your point."

They were silent for a while, not focused on the music but not willing to speak either. Eudocia turned over and rested her head on his chest. Now it was Oren who stared at the ceiling. She reached a hand up to his chin and ran two fingers along his jaw.

"Three days since you shaved, I think."

He chuckled. "Stop it. I don't like when you do that game. It's weird."

"Oh, shut up." Eudocia rose up and planted a kiss on his cheek before falling to the bed at his side again. "I'm ready to be done with school. I just want summer. Freedom from class."

"Yeah." Oren's eyes were on the window now. Something had tapped against the glass to the outside. If only to save himself from the dead end conversation, he stood up from the bed and stalked towards it.

"What was that?" Eudocia asked, now sitting upright.

Oren didn't answer. He walked up to the window and drew the curtains open just a few inches. It was dark outside, but he saw a man stumbling across the sidewalk now. He had both hands on his head, shaking furiously. Then he fell to his knees.

"Cia. Come here. Look at this."

Eudocia rushed to the window and watched as the man crumpled into a ball on the ground and never moved again.

----A Friday-----

Explanations drifted in slowly. Most of it came through rumors, some through news broadcasts. There were many questions and no answers. To make matters worse, the questions continued to pile up throughout that night. In total, four people were found dead by the next morning, two of them in their beds, one in the shower, and then the man on the sidewalk.

School was begrudgingly canceled for Monday, if nothing else then just so teachers could concur with the principal and find out what gossip he knew. The exchange of information was faster than it had ever been in that town, notorious for rumors spreading like fire between the old structures they called home.

Two more bodies were found dead. One in Friday's early hours, before most of the town had eaten their breakfast, and one more around lunchtime. This older man had stumbled into an occupied table at the local restaurant and frightened the small family eating there. None of the deaths were explained, none of them were even speculated on technically, but of course the townspeople had their own ideas of answers.

That evening, Eudocia sat with her parents watching the evening news. They covered the six deaths in quick fashion, relating the names of the deceased and asking for thoughts and prayers to be "showered on the families and friends afflicted." Without a second thought, their attention turned to the local high school baseball games and of course the upcoming community-wide softball tournament. None of these topics interested her much. Just as Eudocia willed herself off the couch, something more dramatic happened.

The news station panned back to the two anchors, a man and woman both in their twenties with remarkably smooth faces. While she carried on about the community softball event and how one could get involved, her cohost started to squint and rub his eyes. His eyes, once focused on the camera, now roamed across the room. Then he made a quick motion, something like "turn away," but the reaction was too slow. The news anchor fell onto his papers, scattering them across the surface. His co anchor screamed and leapt up from her seat.

The television shut off with a pop. Eudocia turned to her parents. They were both gaping at the blank screen, her mother on the verge of tears.

"What... what just happened to him?" Eudocia asked them, standing next to the couch. They were already seated and it was a good thing, because judging by their faces neither could hold themselves up on two feet.

"I don't know, sweetie." Her father rubbed at his forehead, let out an exasperated sigh. "At this rate, you'll get a few weeks off school."

"Dad, did he just... die? Just like that?"

Her father refused to meet her eyes. He ushered her off to bed and then progressed in low voices to discuss something with her mom. Eudocia sat on her bed, texting Oren, and staring out the window every few minutes. Wondering if another one had died. Wondering if it was contagious, how it could be spread, who could get it. Could she? Could Oren?

-----A Sunday-----

Oren watched as his feet landed on every crack of the sidewalk. The myths about bad luck weren't really relevant at this point. If bad luck came from stepping on a crack, the entire town must have done jumping jacks on them. The street passed beside him, void of cars, and some kind of cloud settled more heavily on his shoulders, on the town in general. But not bad luck. Something unnamed.

Eudocia spoke up, walking beside him, bodies connected through their hands as usual. "Are you listening to me?"

He lifted his head. "What? No, I guess not. I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "It's fine."

His eyes began to roam again, over the sidewalks and the buildings with CLOSED signs. Even for a Sunday, this street was incredibly desolate. Some kind of apocalyptic terror had gripped their town that weekend. It had been, without a doubt, the longest three-day weekend he could remember.

"Does this all seem a bit extreme for only a dozen deaths?" he asked, holding her hand more loosely now. The connection weaker. "I mean... it's bad, don't get me wrong. But that's only like... I don't know, a small percent of our town. Not even a percent."

"Yeah, maybe." Her eyes focused on the shop they were currently passing. It was an odd one, a collection of comics, old games, wooden art. But they had a gumball machine, so that was pretty cool. "Twelve deaths is a lot in three days, though."

"That's true."

"I mean... it is a big deal. And school doesn't even seem important now. Isn't that weird? I was so worried about it. Now I don't even care. I don't really feel anything like that." She stopped and faced him. Her eyes were begging for some kind of understanding, any connection. "Do you know what I mean?"

"I do, Cia. You're just scared. I'm scared, too. How could we not be?"

"Scared." She chewed on the word for a moment and then nodded. "I am. I'm scared about this thing. What happens if I die? Or even worse if you do? If my parents do? I don't wanna be... one of the numbers. If you know what I-"

"I know what you mean, Cia, and you won't. We're gonna be okay."

They heard the man before they saw him. That guttural cry for help, his footsteps pounding on the sidewalk. Both turned to face him, charging directly at them. Oren wanted to step out and block him, but his mind worked too slow. The haggard man charged into Eudocia, grabbing at her arms, undistinguishable curses falling from his mouth.

Eudocia jerked backwards and the man toppled onto the ground, writhing in pain near the door of another closed shop.

"Get it out of me!" he screamed, clawing at his face and at his hair. "Get it out! I hate it!"

The two of them ran away from the scene as quickly as possible, not daring to glance backwards. Eudocia began to cry, something about "What if I have it now?" but Oren didn't respond. They were fleeing the area, as far away as possible. They both knew what would happen.

He turned back one time, when they were two blocks away, and saw the man crumpled in an unnatural position against the wall. He had barely moved since Eudocia knocked him over.

-----A Monday-----

The phone rang a few times, longer than usual. Eudocia waited on the edge of her bed, shoes laid out in front of her. She rocked back and forth, the phone on speaker. While she waited for him to answer, she scrolled through Facebook but couldn't avoid the local terror there either.

"Hey, what's up?"

That soothing voice finally poured from her phone. She took a huge sigh of relief, like she did every time he answered.

"Hey, I'm about to head over. You want me to bring soda or pizza or anything?"

"Um, Cia, I... Well, I can't have you over right now."

She hesitated, one shoe halfway on her foot. "What? I'll just... sneak in the window or something."

"No, you don't understand. Like... I really, really can't have you over. It's just not a good idea right now."

"Are you okay, Oren? Did something happen?" Her hands began to shake as she held the phone, watching the length of their call tick slowly higher.

"No, no. Everything's fine, I promise." He was being truthful. His voice always shook whenever he lied. "It's just not gonna work today. I can call you tomorrow and let you know, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"I've gotta go. I'll text you in like an hour. It's just something with my parents. I need to help them with something."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you too, Cia. Talk soon."

She threw her shoes across the room as soon as the call ended and fell back onto the bed. Numbers were spinning in her head. Eighteen dead. Zero symptoms. No news of it in any other town. Nobody was allowed to leave town now. Nobody knew what was going on. The news sources had become unreliable. The entire town filled with a fog of deceit and of death.

Every time she hung up the phone, she wondered if Oren would pick up again. Or if she would be alive to make the call.

-----A Tuesday-----

A call came later that evening and then again the next afternoon. She answered on the second ring, hands shaking once again. Oren's voice came through at last and she breathed another sigh of relief, one that had built up over fifteen hours and seven more reported deaths. Twenty-five total now. None of them friends or family of Oren or her, but it was only a matter of time.

"I need to get out of the house," he said in a whisper, breathing heavily on the phone. She jerked her head back at the loud breathiness in his voice, the dripping weariness. "Please, Cia. Just meet me somewhere. Take me back to your place."

"Of course, Oren. Are you okay? Did anyone..."

"No, no deaths. Not here, anyways. I just need to be with you. Please meet me."

"Of course. I'll leave right now. Love you."

Before he had a chance to answer, she hung up the phone and threw on shoes and a sweatshirt. She gave a hurried explanation to her parents and tried not to look at the television screen where the numbers and faces were piling up. The back end of the newspaper looked extra thick this morning as it sat next to her dad's chair or maybe she imagined it.

She hurtled out of the front door into the blinding sunlight. It had been such nice weather for over a week now. The clear air was broken by the sound of ambulance sirens in at least three different directions. She whirled around, expecting one to come rumbling down her street, but saw no sign. Just that ever-present sound of the sirens, mixed with the occasional police whirr. It wasn't until this week that she'd noticed the two sounds were distinctly different. They had a single similarity. They both meant another one had died.

Oren met her halfway. He had a backpack, which wasn't normal. He'd never stayed the night at her place and this felt like a weird time to start. When she tried to ask for an explanation, he said he'd explain later. They walked back towards her house, both enjoying the break from running and slowing their racing hearts. Eudocia thought she heard a clinking sound from inside the backpack but put the thought out of her mind.

"What..."

When they were within eyeshot of her house, Eudocia spotted the empty driveway. Both cars were gone. She turned to Oren for answers, but he shook his head.

"I don't know. My parents left too. Two cars. I have no idea what's going on."

She started to feel that creeping terror again, inching closer to her heart. They entered the house and found it exactly as before, the television on, the newspaper by her dad's chair. Only the two people she wanted to know were safe had vanished.

"It's gonna be okay," Oren assured her, leading her back towards the bedroom. "Maybe there's a meeting or something."

"But two cars?"

"I really don't know, Cia. Let's just... wait an hour or two. Maybe they'll come."

She stopped suddenly, a few feet from her bedroom. "Can we actually go up to the roof?"

Oren raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"I don't know. I've always wanted to sit up there. Never have. There's a ladder in the backyard we can use, I think."

"Sounds good."

"I'm gonna grab some blankets and some chips. Meet you there?"

He kissed her on the cheek. "Sounds good." Oren started off towards the backyard, still carrying his backpack.

When they were finally perched on the roof, two layers of blankets spread out for extra comfort, they took a few minutes to glance around at the handful of streets they could see. The

air was bursting once again with ambulance and police sirens. Oren pulled out his phone and offered her music to block out the sound.

"No. I think I'll listen." She stared out at the surrounding streets, all of them empty, not a person or car in sight. "I want to remember this."

"Remember? Are you going somewhere?"

She didn't answer the question. Her eyes had locked on the expanse of town in front of them. Oren decided not to push the issue.

"Well, so here's this." He shifted it until the backpack sat in front of them. With a deft movement, he unzipped it and pulled out two plastic cups. While she held those, he used both hands to gingerly extract a wine bottle.

"Oh my god." She grinned at him and shook her head. "Did you really?"

"This is, in fact, a very nice bottle of wine that originated in my parents liquor cabinet they think is a secret. A very fine region, known for its prowess in... old grapes."

"Do you even know what year that is?" She held out the two plastic cups as he poured some into both.

"Don't know. But I know the sticker said fifteen dollars before I peeled it off, so I'm not expecting much."

Once the cups were half-full and the bottle was stored safely in the backpack, they bumped their plastic together and took a sip. Oren squeezed his eyes shut and held it away from him. Eudocia laughed as he poured some of his own into her cup.

"That's not... yeah." He shook his head as if to rid himself of a fly.

"Whatever. You're just a baby."

They waited on the roof until evening fell and then snacked on the chips. Eudocia took another cup of wine. Oren passed. It started to get dark and they leaned back on the roof, unable to lower their heads all the way thanks to their limited blanket size.

The sirens played their song for hours, never ceasing. It was stronger at times, weaker at others, but there was always something. As the sky grew darker around them, the sirens felt closer and closer, although Oren assured her they were just as far as before.

"Why haven't my parents come home yet?" she asked him at one point while he rubbed the back of her neck and shoulders.

"I don't know, Cia. They must be doing something important."

"I feel like something bad happened."

"No. I'm sure everything's okay. They'll be back soon."

They didn't return in the hour following his statement. The world grew continually darker. Eudocia drank her third cup of wine because "why not?" and Oden asked if he could throw the bottle at the neighbor's house. The girl who lived there was stuck-up and bullied Eudocia during her blue-hair phase. She convinced him not to, although just barely, and their night continued in relative peace. The minutes ticked closer to midnight. What would be the fifth day of their town's nightmare.

-----The Wednesday-----

Oden glanced at his phone. "Day five. We're still alive."

She chuckled with no emotion. "Have you been preparing that?"

"Since 11:30, yes."

Eudocia leaned back and threw a chip into the air. It badly missed her mouth and tumbled off the roof.

"Thank you for coming over," she said. "I really... It's been nice to have you here. I don't know if I would've got through this night if you weren't. So... thank you. I really love you."

Oren began to shuffle beside her, pulling the blanket. She turned to face him. He was bent over, holding his head, tears in his eyes. His body twitched, snatching at the blanket. She reached for his hand, but he drew back, a wild expression in his eyes.

"I hear it..." He shook his head violently, smacking himself in the forehead with a fist.

Eudocia grabbed his hand, pulling him closer to her. Oren resisted, struggling against her embrace, pushing her in the stomach, fighting for separation.

"Oren! Listen to me!"

He broke down and began to sob, sprawled on the bare roof now. The shingles left marks on his hands and face where he pressed against them. Eudocia clambered over to him, sitting down. She pulled his head onto her lap and began to stroke his hair.

"Cia, I hear it. I hear it. It's... Oh god I hear it now."

She put both hands over his ears and kissed his forehead. His body writhed, but she felt on firmly.

"It's okay, Oren. It's gonna be okay. I'm here."

He began to scream, louder than the sirens, breaking through the perfect weather and shattering the icy quiet. Oren fought against her grip until his energy was gone and he gave in. She held onto his head, covering his ears, and kissed his forehead again.

"It's an awful sound. But it's not ours."