



Short Story Comp 2023
Young Adult WINNER
Zoe Marks

When the Water Came

The water laps at my ankles, its temperature at a new low. The freezing water wakes me from my trance, snapping me back to the present. Hundreds of boats sail into the distance, the horizon a beacon of hope for so many lost souls looking for a reason to continue living. Without a boat, I'm stuck in my deserted cabin on a hill, the water levels inching closer every day. Hundreds of years ago we were warned of the effect the melting ice caps were creating for our oceans, but we didn't listen. Our presidents and politicians set back while the rising sea levels swallowed country after country; the lowest-lying countries disappearing first. Millions died in the tsunamis that followed, and billions were left homeless. Those who were fortunate enough to own a boat escaped the carnage, sailing into an unknown future. Living alone, I was unlucky enough to live in one of the lowest lying cities, Venice. Flood after flood, eventually the once beloved city disappeared from the map, a real-life Atlantis. Though no lives were lost in the event, thousands were left without a home, government cruise ships taking the population to the safest country amongst the madness, America. Now here I am, in my cabin on a hill.

Alone.

For many, life isn't worth living anymore. All living has become is surviving. At least some have family left to survive it with.

Today I made a decision. I'm going to leave this country, taking nothing but the hope that there are people out there. People like me. I step out of my cabin, breathing in the fresh air of dawn. The path to the main city is speckled with puddles, which splash underneath my feet as I make my way to collect supplies. Though money is pretty much useless now, a form of currency has been adapted over the years. Rare commodities such as medication and cigarettes are as valuable as a hundred-dollar bill; if anything, more. Supermarkets have long been abandoned since the floods, though some long-term foods still line the dusty shelves. Residents of this city left years ago, following a 60-foot tsunami wiping out half the population. Living on a hill, I was unaffected physically, though life-long friends left me that day, leaving me alone to fend for myself. Snapping out of my clouded thoughts, I step into the nearest supermarket, smiling slightly as the automatic doors shut behind me. At least the electricity still works, to an extent. I walk directly to the canned foods aisle, as canned foods are mostly all that's left in abandoned shops such as this. As I fill up my backpack with baked beans, a loud bang catches my attention. Not wanting to scare whatever made the noise away, I tiptoe towards the sound, slipping my backpack to the ground. A man comes into view, strolling through the cracker's aisle. His back facing me, I can't make out his face, only a mop of thick black hair curling over his shoulders.

"It's a common misconception, crackers were one of the first things to go off here," I say, startling the man. He spins around, reflexively grasping a holstered knife strapped to his waist.



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Seeing the knife, I bring my hands out of my pockets, holding them up for him to see, palms up. His deep green eyes stare back at me, giving me a once over before letting his hands fall by his side. "I startle you?" I ask him, a joking tone in my voice. "No, I'm just a little on edge lately, because..." he pauses, seeing my backpack on the ground beside me. "Well, you know why" I nod in agreement, taking him in. Oh god, those eyes.

The deep green reminded me of a mysterious forest, a forest with no end in sight, piercing my very soul. "What's your name stranger?" he asks. "Moirá" I whisper, still surprised to be seeing another human being. "And you are?" he smiles and looks at the ground, picking up on my attitude. "I'm Neil, a pleasure to meet you, Moirá". He says my name slowly as if seeing how it feels in his mouth. "What are you doing this far from the mainland Neil?" I ask him. The mainland is a sanctuary for most survivors of the floods, its high mountains making it ideal for new houses and crops. "I could ask you the same thing," he says, a mischievous grin breaking out on his pretty face. "I asked first," I say, smiling in return. He sighs mockingly, feigning retreat. "I was looking for my brother," he says, the smile disappearing from his face as quickly as it had appeared. "Was?" I cock my head to the side, genuinely interested. "He died," he says, averting his gaze to the floor yet again. "Oh, I'm so sorry, how long ago?" he looks up from the ground, holding my gaze. "I was told it happened years ago, in the floods" I nod sympathetically, knowing firsthand the scale of lives lost in the floods. "I lost my sister," I say, realizing I've never told anyone that since it happened. "I'm sorry," he says, his green eyes piercing me once again. "Everyone's lost someone right?" I say, willing the memories of my sister away. "Right," he replies. Walking towards my backpack, I slip it back on and start to turn away when Neil says, "Wait". His almost pleading voice startles me, turning around as I meet his gaze again. "You never told me what you're doing here" he puts his hands on his hips, a sparkle in his eye.

"I'm leaving my home, trying to find a better place" I reply, purpose filling my voice. He hesitates as if trying to find the right words. I find them for him. "You want to tag along?" I say, taking a step toward him.

"It would be my pleasure".