The Cell Tank

I have to warn you. The story I’m about to tell is not for the faint of heart, the bundles of nerves, the easily shocked, the swiftly uneasy, the too-damn-quick queasy, or the overly jittery. It’s not written for a cynical, sceptical, or “not pessimistic, realistic!” crowd either. My story will require a whole lot of attention from you, stranger, and possibly you leaving any preconceived beliefs you might have at the proverbial door. Cause the life I’ve had, well, it doesn’t exactly start like any other.

My story begins the day I ran away from home. Home, Scroe Town, as inhospitable a place as it is remote, desolate cul-de-sac barely connected through the rapid transit “Tube” system – or tubular East Subterranean Interstate System, as the specialists call it. Still, it was home. But one day, I just ran.

I don’t know why exactly. I was young at the time, couldn’t really think straight. I think the main incentive was to see all these other Scroe kids run, all, too many to count, hurry in one direction. So, I followed. Peer pressure, they call it. It sure is strong.

Don’t worry, though, I wasn’t alone in the throng of frenzied kids. In total, we were five. We just picked a direction, and kept going, fast, fast, fast, without looking back. Took the Tube out of town, the one that’s on a one-way track. You can leave, but you can never come back. It all went without a hitch, at first. We managed to leave all right, all five of us. But it didn’t last. Looking back now, of course, it’s obvious that we really weren’t prepared. It’d only been a few hours since we left home. We’d got off the tube and continued on foot through a bare, marshy region, the kind that didn’t have much to offer in sustenance or cover. Our group was one of many going that way. Where? We didn’t know. Soon enough, fatigue caught up and from five, we became four, then three, then two, then I was alone. It wasn’t easy, going on without them but it felt like what I had to do. I thought maybe, if I could find a good place and future for myself, somehow I’d also be doing it for them.

The hours went by. There were still groups of kids around me, drained, miserable, disoriented. Some, behind, were following me, I noticed. Others, a few steps ahead to my right were all but dragging themselves along. We were all that were left. Our numbers were nothing next to what they’d been. From the innumerable, we were maybe a small hundred now. We would’ve died if it weren’t for what happened next. Now, that’s one part of the story you’re gonna need that credulity I mentioned earlier. Cause it felt like one of these deus ex machina tricks, really. It happened this way: just as it dawned on me how screwed up we really were, that we were gonna drop like flies, bite the biscuit, keel over and push up the very much non-existent daisies,
like all those other kids I’d stepped across on the way here; that’s when I smelled it. I tell you; it had the most exquisite scent I’ve ever had occasion to sniff. It was just up ahead, a lone edifice sticking out in this uninviting wetland. It also seemed like our only chance of survival. Others had spotted it too and I followed their revitalised limping towards it. From closer up, the granular, circular building was even more of a freak sight. Odder: not a door, window, entrance was to be seen. Surely, that should’ve alerted me that no one proper would live in such a place. Surely, I should’ve sensed nothing could be more foolish than taking one more step toward this dodgy house. But I was desperate, and if I hadn’t called and shouted and knocked, the other hundred starving kids would’ve for me. It wasn’t our downfall, though. No one answered our cries for help. I’d lost all my strength, so at some point, I just let myself slide to the floor, back against the wall. I started waiting. I think I fell asleep.

I wake up in a small dark place. I know time has passed because I’m … different. But something feels wrong. I’m riddled with involuntary spasms. I can’t seem to control my body. I can’t see and I can’t hear. I try to gasp for air. My mouth won’t obey me. Where am I? What have they done to me? It’s too much all at once. I curl up into myself as the darkness sweeps over me.

I dream. But it’s not really dreams I dream of. I see wonderful stills of a formidable world. *I see a colourful waterfall crashing onto sharp rocks in the heart of a virgin forest. I survey a lake of bright pink water glistening under the sun. I let the gigantic mouth of a baleen whale close around me and its thousands of tiny prey. I cover in the nooks of coral reefs as dozens of rock-biting fish dive down to feed. I observe as petrified giant turns sanguine soldier and cries his rubescent smouldering tears onto his flanks, oblivious to the trail of destruction they will leave in their wake.*

I shiver. I struggle to conjure up memories of life before this place. The vivid images have easily supplanted anything that preceded them. They’ve awakened something in me, too. I can extend my hand towards the wall. I can almost hear something on the other side. I need to build up strength.

*I climb around snow-covered trees with mischievous blue and white noseless monkeys. I disregard the sheer drop of the dam and prance up a precipitous slope to sate my simple appetite for crystallized salt. I fly like an eagle through the bright green canopy of a lush tropical rainforest, ready to drive my grizzly bear-sized talons into my unsuspecting prey. I chitter away under the moonlit foliage, showing off my range of carefully honed impressions – wing beats, camera shutters, chainsaw whirs, shrill car alarms, deep hound barks and strident bawls. I float around in a dark sea, so deep down, light barely reaches here. Thud. Thud.*
Yes, I hear something! I almost gasp from surprise. Someone’s in here with me, not exactly in the same place but close enough that I can feel her. I’ve regained control over my body, now, and though I notice I’m bound to it, I can vigorously kick the wall. No answer. I want to shout, I want to say all’s well now we’ve found each other. I want to let this other prisoner know that yes, I’m there with her and we’re gonna be okay. Other. Hold on! But my strength’s gone, and it’s all I can do to go back to sleep.

Over the next moments – I can’t be sure whether they’re minutes or hours or months – they’re my lifelines. Other and the stills. Other wards off the darkness that preys on me from the corners of my tank. The stills nurse my hope of leaving the tank behind for good in search of the intriguing world. It must be why they’ve been sent to me, right? To tell me that’s where I’m meant to be. Otherwise, why would this beautiful world call for me? Why would it unrelentingly share its stories?

Stories… I watch penguins scuttle on the ice, then halt, frightened. A chick bravely shields the group, puffing up its chest to scare away ravenous seabirds. I feel sunlight pierce through a dark thick sea of clouds and warm up the depths of my dark sea. I swim with grit-making fish, unknowing engineers of beloved sandy beaches, unthinking dissidents to sea level rises. I hold my breath as flightless goslings must take a leap of faith down a towering pinnacle to avoid starvation. I share the joy of a bedridden father seeing his child toddle towards him for the first time. I witness the cleverness of beings: big black and white whales mastering the laws of physics. Men defying gravity. Fish celebrating geometry.

The wall trembles. I gasp and let out a cry. I’m suddenly scared the whole place’ll come crashing down. I’ve become so used to the prison it’s now become a refuge. I move over towards where I feel Other. I can swear it’s warmer in this corner of the tank. I place my cheek on the dividing wall. I think as hard as I can “Can you hear me? I’m scared.” Silence. Unfortunately, it seems we can’t communicate that way. I extend my hand and touch the wall separating me from her. I explore its surface, but it’s bare. I don’t know what I expected. A door handle? What’s the point of a prison that opens from the inside, dummy? I’m upset at my own stupidity. Quickly, I’m enraged at the whole world. Especially the kidnappers. Being kept away in a small cell for what feels like forever; it’s just awful! I kick the wall with all my strength. Then hold my breath. In the quiet, I’d felt more than heard Other’s answer. But further away, in the distance, I’m sure I can detect hushes and shushes.

I begin to spiral then. Are they spying on me through the wall? Is Other even on my side? I quickly dismiss the idea. She’s one of two good things in my life and I can’t face being alone again. But the spying… I realise then no one but me has ever entered the tank. How strange,
how they’re not feeding me, yet I’m getting stronger; how they’re not checking in on me, yet I’m growing braver. Sure, I’m restrained at my core, but the bind is simple… I feel myself growing more and more anxious. Why have I been so slow to realisation? *A small, predictable pawn in their game.* I just can’t escape the darkness.

Darkness… *Scrawny bears walking across melted ice caps. Families barely escaping their world gone up in flames. A mother, her face scrunched up in an ugly grimace, beating the ground as a casket is lowered into the earth. Explosion after explosion burning down war-torn countries. Headlines: Kid shot for wearing a hoodie. Disease slowly eating away at promising young lives. People dying alone in hospital beds. Hatred, venomous missile aimed at difference. Difference, so minute in the grand scheme of things. Indifference, unwitting enabler to the ignorant mind.*

Pain pricks me like a hot needle. Were the earlier dreams just a lie? If not, what’s the point of such wonders if they’re drowned out by so much pain? What’s the point in the sun warming the whole world if hatred can so easily burn it down? Earlier, I’d have given anything to reach this wonderful world. But in the end, it’s such a *gamble.* Even if I manage to make it there, will I be understood, challenged, loved, respected, appreciated, needed? Single out, alienated, ridiculed, ignored, dismissed, shot down, cheated, judged, slandered, vilified, tormented, used, abused, branded, scalded, blasted up, mutilated –

Knock knock. My eyes flutter open. Other brings me back to this blurry dark tank that constitutes an infinitely less dark world. I wish I could explain to her the dilemma I’m facing, the choice between Here, and the luxury to not exist, or the miraculous world and its infinite possibilities. I whisper, “A world where you can show the bravery of a penguin or the desperation of a gosling, imagine that!”

I smile. If I’ve got a say in anything at all, I decide to live, truly, not just as a half-beast floating in my own mess. I want to dance, I want to sing, I want to shout! I want to tumble around on a soft pillow of snow and feel myself fall in love. I want to take the Gamble, wherever it leads me. So, I’m getting out.

* A whirl of colours, sensations, impressions, a lull into serenity. The resonance of a faint lullaby coming from far, far away.

Shouts. I awake with a start. Oh! I can’t believe I fell asleep again! Just as I was drafting up a plan as well! Voices. There’s a terrible uproar outside. Now the walls are trembling. I can’t let the place go down just as I’m about to escape. I turn towards the wall separating me from Other and knock. Silence. I knock again. She’s gone! I can’t feel her warmth; it’s like she’s been gone hours. Does it have anything to do with that ruckus outside?
The wall trembles again. I know I need to pick up my wits but my two means of calming down are gone. I curl up in a foetal position, just hoping for the best. How ridiculous of me. That’s when I hear her scream. I’m sure it’s her voice, even though I’ve never heard it. I desperately look around, frantic for something to defend myself with. *I definitely won’t let them hurt you.* I inch closer to the wall, prepared for an ambush. Just as I do that, the wall’s opened suddenly. I’m blinded by the afflux of light. Whoever was onto Other’s now onto me. They grab my head firmly in a vice and struggle me out of the tank. I put up a fight, but I’m still choking on the liquid that filled up the tank. The man – it seems to be a man – is so much stronger than me. He manages to drag me further and further from the tank until I’m outside, in a bright lit room.

Somewhere in the room, Other’s still screaming, but the liquid that still fills my ears makes it hard to locate her. My eyes aren’t much use either, all I see are indistinct blue figures. I’m about to try and free myself so I can go to her, but I’m taken aback at the gall of my assailant. He’s slapped me! *On the buttocks!* I’m furious at this inconsiderate treatment. I feel my emotions well up inside me and inflate until they burst and I just … start crying. I’m there, waving my fists, kicking my legs and bawling my heart out. The man just says:

“Well congratulations, ma’am, that’s two,” before cutting the odd cord that linked me to the tank.

Now, reader, I said this was a story like no other, and I was right: *I* made it, me, among millions of other kids. It’s not something everybody can do, eh? And I know, I said I was telling you my story, but granted, my mom’s more of the hero in all this. I mainly stayed still, slept, ate, and floated in my own urine for weeks on end. But still, I like to think the choice I made – choosing the unknown and its risks over the comfortable and certain – well, says something about me. Because every day that passes, it’s a choice I’ll have to make. Meaning it could turn into regrets I’ll come to have when I’m an old, wrinkly person like you, dear reader (I honestly can’t imagine you any other way).

Of course, that’s not my life right now. I don’t get to make a lot of choices, except blue bowl or red bowl, blue comforter or red comforter (my parents don’t have illustrious imagination in terms of baby commodities). And right now – as I tilt my head towards the first person I remember cherishing, blow my finest raspberry, laugh as she perfectly mirrors my facetious faces with her own funny faces – it doesn’t seem like I’ll ever make a difficult decision in my life. But I’m willing to take a bet: the time will come, reader, the time will come.