

Into the Nothing

1. Actualization

Cassie doesn't know how long she's been walking. She doesn't know where she is, or what this place is, or why her feet keep moving toward the tear on the horizon stretching up into the sky that she can't stop looking at. What she's starting to know — what's creeping in around the edges whether she wants it to or not — is that the others around her aren't like her.

In most places, the dust kicked up from the continuous shuffle of feet over the baked and broken red clay ground can't be seen through the low lying, patchy fog. Lifeless thorn tree silhouettes dot the uneven landscape in places, their claw-like shapes are demon hands trying to escape the earth itself. If there's a sun— and surely there must be a sun, for this world is grimy and gray, not the black of pitch— it is blanketed far away behind miles of threatening clouds. Gashes of lightning streak throughout the roiling sky, fleeting and violent, only to disappear with the ever-shifting clouds. Despite its threats, the sky never delivers on them. Perhaps it cannot. The air on the ground remains still and dead with the smell of must and age hanging everywhere.

Cassie walks onward like all the others, one trudging foot in front of the other. Slow. Methodical. She looks at her hands for the hundredth time. They are filthy and raw. Her tiny bare feet dust-caked and tired. Her clothes grey and tattered. This should be scary she tells herself. At six, this should be terrifying. And yet no fear grips her.

The people are getting closer together now as the rift gets ever closer. Once she was so isolated, she thought she was alone here. Now the landscape before her has clear worn and well-travelled ruts where the never-ending flow of people

walks. Far out ahead she can see that it becomes a crowd at— *what should we call that? The opening? I guess that's the opening.*

Cassie studies a middle-aged woman walking a ridge line fifty or so feet off to her right. What she thought she saw earlier is unmistakable now. *The woman is see through. In front of the thorny trees, you can see it. You can see through her.*

Cassie stops and studies her own feet and hands carefully, less afraid than curious.

I can't see through me.

Time passes as Cassie stands watching the woman march inexorably forward. *I don't want to walk anymore. I'm tired. Why do they all want to keep walking?*

Looking back from her resting place, Cassie sees others coming down the path behind her. The valley slowly rolls upwards, and she can see for miles from here. *There are so many of them. Maybe a hunderd, she thinks. Maybe more.*

Everywhere on the horizon they shamle onward through the fog and dust. Flickers of lightning in the sky illuminating them in the distance before they camouflage back into the grayness.

This isn't right. I don't want this for me. I'm not going on.

She spins back towards the rift. Through its towering rip the blackness of space can be seen, dotted in stars and constellations. Her heart races as knowledge begins to fill her. The footsteps behind her crunch the broken ground close now. She turns back to the trail; the approaching woman doesn't look up from her march. She's so close now.

"Why are you doing this?!"

The words come out more an accusation than a question. Her tiny voice seems muted in her ears in the void that is this place. The figure doesn't look up. Doesn't respond. It just continues on.

Cassie steps aside for the figure she's pretty sure would pass right through her, but she doesn't want to be touched either way. She presses a hand tight to her chest, finding some small comfort that she feels solid. She wishes for not the

first time that Ducky, her stuffed friend, was here to help her be brave. To blot out the loneliness.

There's a desire to call out again. To make these things hear her, but she reconsiders. Because she knows.

There will be no answer in the Nothingscape.

2. Contemplation

Cassie has been sitting on the ridge for a long time now. Long enough to understand that time doesn't have much meaning here. And long enough to know that the ribbons of people have no end. She watches the people shuffle ever onward towards the rift and ponders perhaps the most important question of all: What is her place among them?

The ridge is bare and long, a spine of cracked earth rising above the patchy fog below. From here the rift is visible in its full terrible height down in the valley. It's a wound torn into the sky from somewhere below the horizon all the way up into the clouds above. Through the wound, space can be seen. It feels both obvious that space would be there as well as impossible.

The dead stream toward it in endless ribbons that disappear into the fog and reappear again further on. Thousands of tiny figures moving in the same patient, purposeless shuffle. Where they enter the rift, they simply cease. One moment a figure, the next— not.

The fog swallows the ridge in places, drifting up from the valley in slow, indifferent rolls. The thorn trees here are sparse. Just a few skeletal shapes standing sentry along the ridge's edge, their crooked arms drooping out over the macabre scene below. The same dead air from below reaches these heights. This is the air of a place that has never known wind.

Cassie sits with her knees pulled to her chest at the ridge's edge, looking down at the ribbons of dead below. She's been here a while. A long while probably, though she's stopped trying to measure it. Time works different here, if time exists at all.

She watches a cluster of figures disappear into the rift and not come back out the other side. No flash. No sound that carries this far. Just gone.

Where do they go?

She's been asking herself that since she found this spot. She doesn't have an answer yet, but some of the pieces are fitting into place.

They go because they have to. They're dead.

She sits with the thought. It's not scary, just true.

They go because they are dead things doing what dead things do. Like water going down the drain when the plug is pulled. It has to go down the drain because it's water doing what water does.

Cassie smiles slightly, proud of the analogy she's created.

That means I'm probably dead too.

She picks at the cracked clay beneath her fingers and turns the thought over in her mind the way you'd turn over a rock to see what's under it.

That's too bad. I had things I wanted to do.

She watches another figure reach the rift and cease.

He was a boy only a little older than me. I wonder why he died.

Maybe I'm just asleep. Cause I'm solid and can do what I want. I'm special here.

Maybe it's just my dream.

She stares off into the distance watching the ribbons for a moment.

Weird dream though if that's what it is.

She stares off into the lightning-soaked sky. Never thunder. Always lightning.

Yeah. They can't stop. That's why they don't stop. They just can't.

She pulls her knees tighter, coming to grips with the final answer despite the missing pieces of the puzzle.

I have to go into the rift too. I have to go because... because... this isn't a dream. But not today. I'll just stay here a little longer.

3. Confrontation

Cassie knows now that she's not alone here with the ever walking dead. There are other beings, older and bigger, with intentions of their own. Some of them own this place, and some of them simply want to. So far, they've stayed away, but she knows they are out there and can feel them watching. Cassie thought being different from the dead made her special, and it does. But being special, she's learning, means getting noticed. And being noticed in the Nothingscape, she's learning, is not necessarily a good thing.

The ground here is flat and featureless, stretching in every direction until the fog takes it. Her ridge blends into the ground and sky, a barely visible flaw on the horizon at this distance. There's no ribbon of the dead out here, just the occasional shade walking towards their inevitable ending. Out here it's just the broken red clay underfoot and the gray above and the nothing in between the two. The thorn trees have thinned to almost none out here — just one, far off to the left, its silhouette barely distinguishable from the mist surrounding it. The lightning still moves through the clouds overhead, but even that feels more muted here, like a storm happening to someone else. It is the kind of place that makes you wonder if you've been walking in circles. The kind of place where it doesn't really matter if you have.

Cassie has been walking for no reason in particular. There's nowhere to go out here and she knows it. There's also no fear of getting lost. She knows she could simply stop making active choices that go against the order of things and her feet would take her back with the instincts of a migrating bird.

Yes, she can feel the forces trying to guide her.

God, maybe?

She's wondered this at times, but she doesn't think so.

Not the God in my bible anyway.

She recalls the pictures in her picture bible on her bedroom shelf with their bright colors and stories of boats and floods.

So far, the forces haven't decided she's worth bothering with though.

If I'm being bad, I'm not being THAT bad. They are watching me though. I can tell. All of them are. Why are they doing that?

The fog moves around her feet with each step, sluggish and indifferent. The clay crunches soft and dry beneath her. She counts her steps for a while and then loses count only to decide it never mattered anyway.

There's really nothing out here.

She's thinking about the rift. About when she'll go into it. One day she knows she will. She wonders what that will be like. The thought doesn't frighten her exactly. It just sits there, heavy and patient.

They don't want me to know. They've given me— allowed me— much knowledge, but they don't want me to know that.

She almost doesn't hear the voice at first amongst her own jumbled thoughts. It seems to arrive the way everything does in this place. Without announcement. It's simply there when before it wasn't.

"Well now. Aren't you a curious little thing."

Cassie stops walking and the dust settles on her filthy toes. The hair on her arms stands in gooseflesh. She turns slowly.

The Seamstress looks ancient, kindly, and harmless. Her clothes— The floral dress, cardigan, and wire rimmed glasses— they aren't tattered or dirty like everyone else. Most of her thin gray hair pulled into a bun behind her leaving only loose edges too short to be restrained to hang about her ears. She holds her hands, folded, pleasantly in front of her.

Cassie isn't fooled. In the Nothingscape— the land of the dead— there is no such thing as kindly and harmless.

She is very old. Even older than she looks. They don't like her here.

"You've been here a good while," the Seamstress continues, tilting her head with grandmotherly warmth. "All alone. That must be terribly frightening."

"I'm okay," Cassie says.

"Are you?" The smile broadens to show aged, yellow teeth. It is discomfoting in its pleasantry. "A little girl like you, so far from home. I wonder — would you like to go back? To the world you came from?" She lets that settle. "I can help you go back."

Cassie looks at her for a long moment.

She wants something.

"I don't think that's how it works," Cassie says finally.

"Oh?" The Seamstress tilts her head the other direction. Curious. Probing. "And how does it work, little one?"

"I don't know exactly," Cassie says, which is true. "But I know it doesn't work like that. You don't just go back."

"Right," the Seamstress says, almost to herself. Then brighter — "Well child, I can go back. I've always found that we can be anything we put our minds to," the smile broadens into uneasy pleasantry again. "Surely you agree with that, don't you child?"

Cassie considers this and supposes she does. Out beyond the Seamstress the lone thorn tree stands in the fog, its arms reaching. Its grotesque form is more comfortable to look at than the Seamstress herself.

"Those that are beyond don't see it that way," Cassie says. "They don't like you. Or that you do that."

Something twitches behind the Seamstress's eyes. Just briefly. Something dark and hostile. Then the smile returns, warm and unhurried, like there is all the time there is.

"No," she says softly. "I don't suppose they do." She unfolds her hands and turns slightly, as if she just remembered somewhere else to be. "We will talk again, little one. Count on it."

The fog takes her gradually, the cardigan and the floral dress dissolving into gray— and then, sooner than distance should allow, she is simply gone.

Cassie stands in the flat emptiness of the Nothingscape and watches the space where she was.

She is not a good person.

Cassie resumes walking.

Not a good person at all.

Afterward

This short story was created to tell a tale of the place between our existence and what lies beyond. My intention was to make it surreal and otherworldly. You will be the judge of whether or not I succeeded.

As part of giving it a different feel, the story is intentionally told in a unique format. It is unlike the Emergents novels or other stories I have in the works. Here, I used a special structure for the short chapters in which each is made up of three parts: the summary, the setting, and finally the scene. The pattern repeats each time through. I'd love to hear your thoughts on both the chosen structure and the content of the story itself.

-Cujo