

‘The Life and Times of Sam the Wanderer as the End of Days Approaches’

by

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I have never lived in a world before The Dogs. Rudie says that means I missed out on *‘certain meaningful, formative moments in my childhood’* and that means that I’m *‘very different’* to her and Elijah. Rudie tells me about all these things I should miss, like *‘orange juice’* and *‘toothpaste’* and *‘cooked lobster’* and *‘converse shoes’* and *‘comfy bathrobes’* and *‘driving’* and *‘showers’* and *‘McDonald’s’*. She describes them utterly and completely, every detail, backwards and forwards. I always smile at her and laugh when she laughs, and tell her I want to hear more about the things she misses.

It’s only a half of a lie. Because I do want to hear, but only to make Rudie happy.

Elijah never tells me about the things he misses, which is fine. He’s just quiet and sits in the corner most of the time. Rudie calls him *‘brooding’*. She says that means *‘someone thinking until it makes them sad.’*

Rudie says there are lots of things in the world that can make you sad. I don’t really get sad. Not like Rudie or Elijah get sad.

Rudie says another reason why Elijah is always sitting in the corner is because he’s *‘scared’*. Rudie says that being scared works kind of like being sad if you’re *‘brooding.’* He holds our gun in his right hand and strokes the cold metal with his left, playing with the bolt handle, slowly assembling and disassembling. His eyes have absorbed its coldness, its sheen, its *‘impenetrability’*. He is a *‘brooding’* man.

The Dogs are the only things that scare me.

Elijah and Rudie and I sit in a dead person’s house, miles and miles away from Rudie’s Home, which is somehow different from a house. I haven’t figured out why they’re different yet. It’s been days since we’ve gone anywhere because Rudie and Elijah knew there was a Horde coming. When a Horde comes, we have to stay inside.

Sometimes, Rudie will hold a piece of paper - a *‘map’* - close to her face, as the light shines in from the gaps between the planks on the windows. She drags her fingers along the paper and counts the numbers that tell her where we are in the world. She gives some spots funny names, like Wellington or Nelson, and tells me what they were like before.

The last name Rudie told me was Papakura. That’s where we are now. It’s a place of desertedness. No animals, no trees and shadows everywhere. I think that’s the way all named places are. Big blocks of grey, or sometimes boxes covered with colourful words like *‘pharmacy’* and *‘cafe’* and *‘takeaway’*. Rudie leads us to them on things she calls *‘motorways’* that people didn’t always walk on and that weren’t always crumbly and bursting with weeds. Rudie says they’re the way people find things. I don’t think she’s right.

I find things through a never-ending stream of moments. I see it in clouds, signs and sunsets. I remember the curve of the land as it rushes up to greet me; the colour of the sky and the way the wind picks through my hair. I see it in the bend of a corner and the shape of the trees. And then I know where I am and where everything else is around me. I’m *‘very different’* though because I don’t know the world before The Dogs.

I can't help being different. It's all I can think about when Rudie tells me about the *'malls'* and the *'restaurants'* and the *'supermarkets'*. Rudie'll be telling me a story and I'll lean on her shoulder. She'll brush her fingers through my hair, and I'll close my eyes. I'll take every word I don't know and invent a world where they're something new. They're the sounds that the birds make that echo in the cold and the quiet. They're the way the light hits Rudie's face when the sun just touches the horizon. They're the smiles that tug at the edge of Elijah's mouth when I give him a leaf or a flower from the veins and arteries of the broken *'motorway'* we walk.

I would never tell Rudie the way I find things. It's the sort of thing that makes Rudie sad.

There are countless things in Rudie's universe, and she misses every single one of them. She misses all the small things and the big things and the things I think are probably useless because we live fine without them. She always tells me how much *'we took it all for granted'* and how much harder the world is without them. Sometimes she'll cry then, just a little bit, and then we'll think about something else.

Sometimes we find the things Rudie talks about. They're usually in one of the boxes people have left behind for us inside of their basements. Rudie's always so happy then, and sometimes even Elijah will smile and hug me. It was days and days and days ago that we found *'toothpaste'* which was probably the last new thing we found.

'Toothpaste' is this sparkly sticky stuff that people used to put in their mouth to clean their insides. Rudie says it's for teeth, but you don't even need to clean your teeth. It contains *'stardust'* and other stuff like *'apple seeds'* and *'elephant tears'*. Or big words like that at least. *'Toothpaste'* is blue like oceans or rivers or Rudie's pants. Rudie tells me they're the same thing. The same colour. Even though I've seen a river before and I've seen bits of the sea, and they're not. She says before The Dogs they used to be different. Blue, not red and grey and brown.

It's really weird and sticky and cold. The *'toothpaste'* I mean. I stuck some in my mouth when Rudie and Elijah weren't looking, and it burnt my tongue, but in a cold way. I smelt like *'toothpaste'* for forever after that. I don't know why anyone would eat it. But I'm *'very different'*. I've never lived in a world before The Dogs.

When we're stuck in a basement for days and days, we always come back to The Dogs. They haunt us even when we can't see them. When Rudie is done talking about the world to me, and I've done all the *'schoolwork'* she can think of, we always come back to The Dogs.

The Dogs came in the night, cloaked in shimmering shadows, howling and baying in the dark. They had teeth the size of arms and arms the size of me and they had eyes that made you want to melt right into the ground, huge and glowy yellow in the night. It's all you can see of them when they come out of the darkness.

Rudie always says *'it's a miracle'* that she survived. She didn't have any planks on the windows and doors like we do now. She was all alone in her house when she heard the sound of the Horde. I know that sound *'like the back of my hand'*. It's the sound of a thousand howls in the dark, the sniffing and growling that pricks up the hair on your arms and legs. That feeling of their hot breath on your neck. So Rudie grabbed her cow prod and her hunting rifle and locked every door in the house, keeping herself hidden in her bedroom. She said they came inside and sniffed at everything; knocking things over, breaking her tables and her beds, eating all of her food. She waited up all night until she couldn't hear them anymore.

Rudie says she watched as the sun rose for the first time in the days After The Dogs and that she followed that sun until she found me.

Sometimes I can tell when Rudie is lying. I think there was a long time that she followed the sun before she found me.

‘Oi Sam.’ Rudie whispers. She’s at the door, her eye to the hole in the board. ‘It’s time to go.’

I stand up slowly. Until a couple of months ago I was the same height as her. Now we’re nowhere close. I’m taller than Elijah too, so much taller he calls me ‘*abnormal*’. It makes the world look so different. I’m ‘*very different*’ though so I’m used to it.

Elijah stands up too. He’s very skinny, and his skin hugs to his bones. Shadows cut deep underneath his cheekbones, and his eyes have sunken into his face like a boot does in the snow. He’s got hair that’s thin and dark grey and hangs like spider webs around his face. He puts on his jacket and zips it up, but his hand never lets go of the rifle. Shoes, socks, and then he slings the rifle over his shoulder.

Elijah’s story is different from Rudie’s. Rudie says Elijah will ‘*never be the same again*’.

Before The Dogs, Elijah had a Wife. A Wife was a person you promised you were going to live your whole life with and make a Family and have Kids. Elijah did that, and he was happy.

Then The Dogs came.

Elijah has ‘*insomnia*’ which means he can’t sleep very well, so he was up when they came. He was in the bathroom, in the ‘*shower*’. The Wife was in the bedroom. The Kids were down the hall, ‘*sleeping like little angels*’. I didn’t know what an angel is but Rudie says that’s not important.

‘And well... No one can escape from The Dogs once they find you.’

Elijah always says it that way. And he never says any more.

Sometimes he won’t for a couple of days.

There was a woman Elijah and Rudie knew before who was my ‘*mother*’. She died. Then it was just me and Elijah and Rudie forever after.

I go over to help Elijah with the boards that block the door. We work methodically, in sync like we always have. Rudie does the windows.

One time I snuck Rudie’s paper from her when she and Elijah left me alone one night. I stared at it for a long time, trying to make sense of the wiggly lines and the greens and blues. It didn’t feel as special as I thought it would to drag my finger across the paper or pronounce the impossibly small words that covered the map. She had circled special names - Auckland and Invercargill. Invercargill’s Rudie’s Home. I know that. Sometimes Rudie will talk about it. But more than Invercargill, they talk about Auckland. It’s our ‘*destination*’. They’re both sure we’ll find what they left behind there: big piles of ‘*orange juice*’ and ‘*toothpaste*’ and everything else they had before The Dogs like ‘*happiness*’ and ‘*love*’.

I don't mind us not being in Auckland. Auckland is a named place - and like the rest, it will be a land of desertedness. I know this, but it's something I wouldn't tell Rudie. Or Elijah. They would both become *'brooding'*. I've thought about this.

Still, I can't stop wishing that they would let us live somewhere out in the unnamed places - maybe at Rudie's Home or Elijah's Home. I'll hunt for them because I'm good at that and they can garden and write down all of their stories and leave it there for some other Sam, Elijah and Rudie to find.

I pry off the final plank and let it fall to the floor with a *clunk*. Elijah wrenches the door open, releasing a shower of dust. There, the outside waits.

The street is destroyed. The *'concrete'* has turned to Rubble. Some of the tall grey boxes have fallen in the distance. But the dust is clearing.

Rudie walks out from the house and moves her hand across the scratches that cover the walls.

'They're getting stronger.' Elijah comes out of the house, shielding his eyes from the sun.

'We had better keep moving then,' Rudie says. She and Elijah begin to walk along the road, jumping between the bits of *'concrete'* that are left.

I stay a moment, looking and listening. The bird calls echo across the world, and slowly but surely the sun begins to rise. It touches my skin like *'little angels'*.