


WITHOUT A PAST, THERE IS ONLY THE

AFTER



PADRAIG KENNY

AFTER

PÁDRAIG KENNY



WALKER
BOOKS



“The primary duty of a parent is to look after their child, and to teach them what it means to be a good person.”

– **DR BENJAMIN GELLER,**

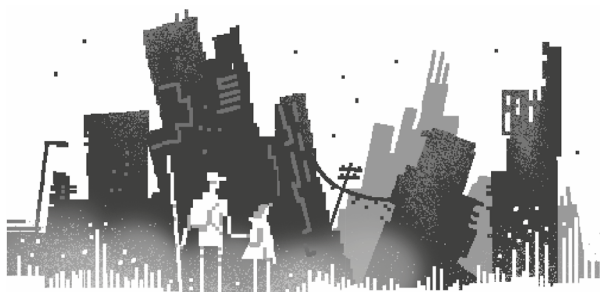
FROM DR GELLER'S COMPLETE GUIDE TO PARENTING



“And having made it he divided the whole mixture into souls equal in number to the stars, and assigned each soul to a star..”

– **PLATO**





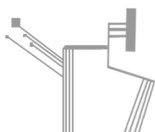
CHAPTER I

“Tell me again how the world ended.”

They were standing on a ridge overlooking the dead city. Even from this distance, Jen could see the roads gnarled and choked by rusted hulks of cars and trucks, and the gradual advance of decades-old vegetation. The sky was a dull grey, but just for a moment the sun shone through, and she saw the quick glint of orange on a window high up on a tall building.

A *skyscraper*. They were called that because they used to scrape the sky. That’s what Father had told her.

Father had one foot on the lip of the ridge and was gripping his wooden staff. He scanned the horizon.



“I’ve told you before. Many times,” he said.

“Tell me again.”

He turned and looked at her, his forehead lined in curiosity. “Why?”

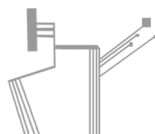
“Because it’s a story and I like stories.”

He picked up his backpack and shouldered it. It was only a small thing, but Jen always marvelled at how graceful he was, even when he did small things. And when he was still he was graceful also, which probably wouldn’t make sense to anyone else, but it made sense to her. Still and graceful, like nothing she’d ever seen. The only thing she could compare him to was a series of pictures she’d once found in a book. They were pictures of a man dancing. He was wearing dark skin-tight clothes and in some pictures he was pirouetting through the air. In others he crouched, a look of fierce concentration on his face.

Father nodded. “Of course, how it ended. I suppose the world ended slowly at first, then gradually, then all at once.”

Jen glared at him. “Tell me properly. That was the condensed version.”

“It was, yes, but I told it well, don’t you think?”



Jen rolled her eyes.

“You don’t agree, Jen?”

Jen sighed as she picked up her own backpack.

“Do you think there’ll be food down there?”

“Most likely.”

She tapped her forehead as a sign. Father nodded in understanding. His face relaxed and his worry lines disappeared.

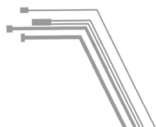
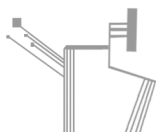
“Excellent expression. It almost looks natural,” said Jen.

“Do you think so?”

Father looked pleased, and Jen was even more impressed.

“First, people destroyed their own habitat and the habitat of other animals,” said Father. “This was the slow method, a method so gradual that humanity as a whole didn’t notice at first, and when they eventually did notice they chose to ignore it.”

They were walking in the city now. The skyscrapers loomed over them as they passed beneath their vast cool shadows. They picked their way through the



wreckage. Jen noticed the usual crazy zigzag pattern of the vehicles that clogged the road. Some were piled one on top of the other, their metal shells burst and buckled, doors hanging off, windows shattered.

“So, they just let it happen?” said Jen.

Father nodded. “Despite the protests of some.”

“That makes no sense,” said Jen.

“Humans make no sense,” said Father.

Jen narrowed her eyes at him. “I make sense.”

“Sometimes,” said Father. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then he smiled. “That was a joke.”

“I know.”

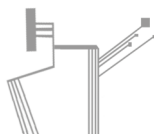
“Was it good?”

Jen looked at him with mock pity.

Father smiled more broadly. “I shall make more.”

“Make sure they’re better than that one.”

Jen spotted something on the ground. It was a soft toy, a pink and white animal. It looked like a rabbit. Thinking about rabbits made her stomach rumble. They hadn’t caught any in a while. She liked rabbit. She picked up the toy and dusted it off. *This used to belong to someone*, she thought. *A child perhaps*. Thinking about it made her feel uneasy. Suddenly



she didn't want to look at the wreckage any more. She put the rabbit in her backpack.

"And then?" she asked.

"The Singularity," said Father. "Mankind had evolved to a state where integration with machine systems became an accepted part of life. This integration meant a melding of the mechanical with the biological. From birth, people had microchips implanted that allowed them to access a vast information and living system."

Jen nodded. "They called it the Hive."

Father stopped and looked at her. "You've heard all this before, Jen. Why do you need to hear it again?"

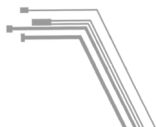
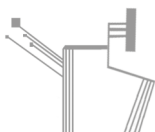
"You know me, I like stories."

"Why?"

"They help make sense of things."

"And this one does exactly that?" asked Father mildly.

No, Jen wanted to say. No, it makes no sense at all, but maybe one day it will. Maybe one day after you've told it to me often enough, I'll begin to understand it, but for now I don't. I don't understand this story at all, but I know it terrifies me.



“And then?” she said.

Father always seemed to hesitate a second before this part of the story.

“And then the Flood,” he said matter-of-factly. “A cataclysmic short circuit of the Hive that destroyed all systems connected to it, both inorganic and organic.”

“So, machines failed and people with microchips in their heads had their brains fried.”

“In essence, yes.”

“And what was left of humanity was sent back to the Dark Ages.”

Father looked at her.

“I read about the Dark Ages in a book.” She gestured around her. “This seems like the Dark Ages.”

“One could say that, I suppose. You are very perceptive, Jen.”

Jen tapped the side of her head. “Book learning.”

“Indeed.”

“Do you think there’ll be a library?”

“It is a city, Jen. There is always a library. But food first.”

And, right on cue, Jen’s belly grumbled again.