The House at the End of the World

"That house terrifies me."

My wife was holding my hand with her small ones, as she often did when she wanted me to comfort her.

"It terrifies me too."

"Then don't go. Stay here with us. Mike wants you to teach him how to build a raft, I'll make you guys cinnamon cookies while you work."

Mike was my eldest, and I doubted he wanted any such thing. Gangly, dark-haired youth, he was at the age where he preferred to explore our little valley by himself, make his own mistakes and forge his own path, as I did at his age.

"I have to go, you know that."

"No, I don't know that. No-one ever goes there, why should you?"

"Because I'm not everyone else. Because I need to understand."

"What is there to understand? You have a family that loves you, you own beautiful land, everyone in the area, upriver and down, knows and respects you, and they come from miles around to see your machines, why do you have to risk everything for your curiosity?"

"Because that's who I am. That's why you love me, remember? I can’t bury my head in the sand. Everyone I've talked to knows the house. Everyone I've talked to knows they came from there. No-one could ever tell me what's inside. No-one ever dares checking. You can't tell me that's normal."

"But why you?"

"Because everyone else is busy building rafts. Because everyone else is making cinnamon cookies. I have to see what's inside."

"You're being stubborn."

"I suppose I am."

"I guess I have to pack you some lunch."

"They serve food on the boat."

"I'll make some just in case."

I hugged her tight.

The boat dropped me off at twilight. It looked like an old steam boat but it did not run on steam, or on anything else I could make out. There were some people lounging on the deck, smoking pipes, playing music, just standing and trading tales. They all watched me as I made my way down the gangway towards that little mauve house.

It was not much to look at. A little mauve house in the middle of an empty green valley. Its roof tiles were slate grey. Its door brown with a shiny brass handle. A short gravel road led to it from the small dock, and I crossed it briskly.

I walked up the two steps to the front door and knocked.

"We're open."

We're open?

I turned the handle and went inside. The house itself was one big, peach-colored room. There was a long wood counter on the left-hand side, and a short old woman was standing behind it, looking at me.

"I suppose you're here to terminate?" She asked me as I was making my way inside.

"Well, I don't know." I said. There was nothing behind the counter that I could see, not even a chair for the old lady.

"It's a big decision." She told me gravely, "No takesies backsies."

"Naturally."

"I suppose I should give you time to think."

"That would be nice." What could she mean by terminate, what could that little old lady possibly do in this seemingly empty house?

"Well?"

"When you say 'terminate', what exactly do you mean?"

She gave me a blank look, then waved her hand around me in a circle.

"Terminate. This. Return your consciousness to its natural state."

"I don't understand."

She sighed.

"This...riverland paradise of yours, it's not real. You were all supposed to only be here for a few years, but there were complications."

She was telling me terrible things, ridiculous things, my mind should have reeled. But I knew all of this already. I felt like I was remembering some terrible secret I buried in my childhood. I hated it, but the process of acceptance had already happened years ago.

"And what will happen when I terminate?"

"You will wake up. I had already begun the process when you told the sailors you wanted to be dropped off here, but I still need your approval, of course."

"My wife, my children, what will happen to them when I terminate?"

She looked at me gently.

"As part of the protocol, you will be replaced."

There was something left unsaid. Perhaps it's part of the process of termination she had already begun, but my mind was beginning to clear.

"Daniel, was he...replaced?"

Daniel was my youngest son. He was five. I could not remember for how long he was five now.

"The process is difficult for young children." She said delicately.

My hand was white around the edge of the counter. I could feel the cords of muscle in the wrist stretched taut, as I was trying to close it around through solid wood.

I stood there for a long while. She made not a sound. She did not breath, and I was sure of it.

"Terminate me."

"I have sent a wheelchair to your room. You will find walking difficult at first. It's connected to the mainframe, I will guide you from there."

"Terminate me."

And she did.

Walking was difficult. The old woman's voice came out of an electronic wheelchair's speakers, advising me to ride it until I had built my muscles again. I walked.

I walked out of the holding chamber, where I was hooked to a variety of tubes, going through nearly every notable part of my body. The empty wheelchair drove itself by my side and looked ridiculous doing so.

I looked at the chrome eggs that held my fellow riverland folk as I walked, slowly.

"Is my wife in one of them?"

"Your wife isn't here."

No, of course she wasn't. I was beginning to remember. This was a male compound, tailor-made to keep an adult male body balanced and healthy while in an induced coma.

I made my way out of the chamber, and into a long white hallway. I noticed every one of the fluorescent lights were on as far as I could see, I supposed I should thank the old lady in the wheelchair for that.

"What are you looking for? I could guide you."

"I need to see."

I chose a direction at random and kept walking it. Eventually, a few hallways and large rooms later, I made it out of the compound.

I walked out of the large glass front doors, wearing a thin hospital gown I picked up on the way. Looking around me, there were a few compounds just like mine. Large white rectangles. One for women and two for children, male and female each. All on grey stone slabs that stretched as far as the eye could see. As far as the dome.

I walked towards it, and I remembered. The bombs, and the volcano, and the bitter storms. We never thought the storms would be the ones to end us.

I walked towards the dome, slowly. It was massive. A feat of engineering. Impenetrable shield before the rage of God. To give his children the time they needed to build their arks.

I remembered being chosen to design it. I was so proud back then. I would give the scientists time to make their ships, the time to build the equipment we would need beyond the sea of stars. Time for our scientists to find the reason for the storms and quell them. They asked me to help them, but I had done my duty, and chose to accompany my wife and children in their sleep.

"Where are they?" I asked the machine. It knew who I was talking about.

"They finally managed to construct a ship two years ago. They're on their way to a habitable planet, to maintain the human race."

I walked towards the dome slowly, noting numbly the head-sized rocks of hail that would hit it. The dark grey sky that stretched from horizon to horizon. The hurricanes.

And the thin spider web that was making its way through it. The delicate web of the end of our world.

"They were supposed to stop this. They were supposed to save us. All of us. They were our best and brightest. We put our lives in their hands."

I could not see the web anymore, or the hail. Everything was just a grey smudge as I thought about my wife, and Mike, and Daniel who died all those years ago.

The machine was silent.

I wiped the tears away and looked at the web again. I am no great poet, I could not write an epitaph for the Earth that would do it justice. I'm an engineer.

"Tell me, where do you keep the electrical tape?"