

Mrs. Struthio checked on the loaf of bread she had left out to cool earlier that morning. Finding it no longer warm to the touch, she nodded approvingly and took a large, serrated bread knife out of the drawer, cutting the loaf into thick slices. Usually, she would not be so wasteful, but one of the larger bags of flour was about to spoil, and she wanted to use it all up before it went bad. Besides, this was a special occasion - a little celebration was in order. Setting aside the bread knife, she opened the pantry and took out three of the large plates the family used for breakfast. She mentally checked what she had prepared as she set the table with the plates and mismatched cutlery. To pair with the luxury of fresh bread, she had taken some sausages out of the deep freezer in the basement. Although her husband disliked it when she took from the precious stock of meat he had built up, he had been talking about tonight for a week now - he would surely understand that this was not to be an everyday thing. Satisfied that her preparations were complete, she nodded once more to herself and called her husband and daughter for breakfast.

Her husband, Mr. Struthio, was already downstairs and came to the table as soon as she called. He was a beast of a man, and lumbered in from the living room before plopping himself into his designated chair at the head of the table and waiting for his wife to place the dishes on the table. She set some toasted slices of her fresh bread on the table, along with a jar of wild blackberry preserve that she had made two autumns ago. Next to it, she settled the plate of sausages, which Mr. Struthio reached for immediately, and a bowl of soft-boiled eggs from the chickens in the backyard.

“Eleanor!” Mrs. Struthio cried once more, “Breakfast is ready! Come down!” “That girl,” sighed Mr. Struthio, unfolding his paper carefully from where Mrs. Struthio had left it at his spot at the table. “What are we going to do with her? So lazy. My dear,” he

changed the subject tactfully, "Is the coffee ready yet?" Mrs. Struthio hummed noncommittally as she fetched the coffee pot from the kitchen and poured each of them a mug. They were going to have to cut down on the amount they drank, Mrs. Struthio thought to herself, as the beans would likely be one of the first things to go stale, and their Pennsylvania backyard was hardly the ideal climate for growing their own. A shame, she liked using the grounds in her garden.

Eleanor finally descended the stairs with all the usual fanfare of a teenager being told to do something they did not like. She was a pretty girl, believed Mrs. Struthio, although of course, as her mother, she was biased. She was beginning to get control of her teenage acne, and Mrs. Struthio made a note to stock up on the moisturizer that she liked when she went to the store later.

"So," Mrs. Struthio said, "today's the big day."

Eleanor huffed out a laugh at that. "Sure it is. Just like the last time. Or the one before that."

"Eleanor!" Mrs. Struthio gasped as Mr. Struthio threw down his paper in frustration. "Can't we just have one pleasant breakfast!?" Mr. Struthio snapped, "You should be grateful that your family is prepared - think of all the poor folks out there who don't have a clue what's coming for them!" Eleanor ignored them; she seemed to have suddenly decided that the process of spreading jam on her toast required her undivided attention. With a great *humpf*, Mr. Struthio picked his paper back up and briefly muttered to himself. The silence that followed hung heavy above their heads. In an attempt to break the macabre spell cast over them, she spoke.

"I was planning on going to the store today," she said, "one last run for the necessities. I have flour, tinned fish, and coffee on the list, but is there anything else I should get while I'm there?"

“Some beans,” Mr. Struthio grumbled, “can never have too many of those dried beans.

Get the good ones, though. No sense in worrying about money at this point.”

“Of course, dear. I’ll get a few cans of those kidney beans you like, too. What about you, Eleanor?” Eleanor glanced up and saw her father engrossed in his newspaper.

Happy to be ignored, she added hopefully, “Maybe some cookies,” before returning to poking at her toast.

“You’ll come with me, won’t you? I’ll be going to the bulk-supply store for the flour, and I’ll need an extra pair of hands to bring it to the car, and your father will be busy checking on the garden and the chickens.”

“Sure,” Eleanor said mildly, “It’s not as if I have anything better to do.”

Delighted at the prospect of spending this momentous day with her daughter, Mrs. Struthio hummed happily as she cleared the table. She didn’t bother washing the dishes just yet, preferring to leave them for after her shopping trip, but made a great show of putting the leftover food away for later. “Can’t start wasting food now, can we?” she asked nobody in particular. Her husband grunted an acknowledgement as she put the leftover sausage into the fridge. Like the deep freezer, it was hooked up to their generator, which was in turn powered by the solar panels lining their roof, so it would likely run for a while yet.

Once she had put the remains of breakfast away, she nodded proudly to herself as she surveyed the kitchen, which was perfectly clean apart from the stack of plates and cups waiting patiently in the sink. They would need to spend a great deal of time indoors in the coming months, and a tidy home is a tidy mind after all. She went to get a comfortable pair of shoes and changed into them from the baby blue house slippers she had put on this morning. She called for Eleanor once more, and she came down the stairs.

In a good mood, Mrs. Struthio idly suggested, "Why don't you drive us there, dear? This will be our last peaceful outing for a while; it's a good chance for you to get some practice in."

Eleanor eyed the keys Mrs. Struthio was dangling cautiously before reaching under to catch them, as if she did not want to touch her mother directly. This annoyed Mrs. Struthio, but she refused to let her mood sour - this was a momentous day, after all. She loaded the box full of large, reusable canvas totes she used for groceries into the trunk of the family's station wagon as Eleanor started the car. As Mrs. Struthio slid into the passenger seat, she saw that the gas tank was only half-full and made a mental note to have Eleanor stop by the gas station on the way there. As they drove to the store, Mrs. Struthio instructed Eleanor to stop here and there to pick up various odds and ends they were missing. They stopped at the hardware store for a roll of chicken wire, at the pharmacy for a tub of vaseline and two tubes of Eleanor's favorite moisturizer, and at the greengrocer for a bit of fruit. As she turned over apples and squeezed avocados, Mrs. Struthio explained to Eleanor that the garden plants wouldn't be fruiting for a while, so even though they would eventually have fresh fruit again, this would be the last they had for a while. Eleanor nodded neutrally as she spoke, and Mrs. Struthio felt her spirits lift once again. Sure, Eleanor could be difficult, she thought to herself, but she was a good girl - she would be alright, especially once it was just the three of them; she would understand that her mother and father only wanted what was best for her.

The car lapsed into silence as they pulled into the sprawling parking lot of the bulk food store. It was busier than usual - but then again, it always was on Sundays such as these. It wasn't yet raining, but heavy gray clouds hung from the sky like guillotines, threatening a downpour. Too apprehensive about the rain to do the usual hiking and canoeing popular in the area, locals and tourists alike turned to one of the few indoor activities the small town had to offer: shopping.

But this was a little town, with a population that barely brushed past one thousand in a good year. There were no sprawling strip malls or sky-scraping shopping centers; the most popular shops in the town were an ice cream parlor attached to an antique store, and the bulk foods store.

At first, Mrs. Struthio had disliked the sparse population of the town, but in time, the solitude of the countryside was something she had come to appreciate. She had been hesitant to marry her husband at one point, disliking the idea of another person in her house; luckily, they were birds of a feather in that sense, and spent most of the day in their respective realms: him in the library and fields, and her in her kitchen and bedroom. The second floor of the house was Eleanor's territory - it contained her beloved bedroom, library, and a grand bathroom. The only truly communal spaces in the house were the dining room and the basement, which served as a cellar; meals were the only time the family consistently came together.

They were lucky today and found parking close to the entrance, and Mrs. Struthio sent Eleanor to get a shopping cart as she reviewed her list. Written in black ballpoint pen, it read: *flour, tinned fish (sardines), and coffee*. Scribbled underneath with a different, blue ballpoint were *beans* and *chocolate chips*. After a moment of thought, she pulled the blue pen out of her purse and added *rice* and *cooking oil* to her list. When Eleanor returned with the cart, Mrs. Struthio had her read it aloud and nodded approvingly. They went about their shopping as usual, Eleanor waiting patiently by the cart as her mother carefully turned over everything put into it. As she shopped, Mrs. Struthio explained to her the criterion by which she was choosing their food, to which Eleanor nodded dully, occasionally accompanied by an affirmative "uh-huh." This continued until they passed by the prepared foods section of the store. It had been several hours since breakfast now, and the pair of them were beginning to grow hungry. Mrs. Struthio came to

a sudden stop in front of the display of neatly packaged rotisserie chickens, causing Eleanor to run into her with the cart. She gave Eleanor a quick look of reproach, but didn't scold her.

"Are you hungry, dear?" Mrs. Struthio asked.

"I could eat," Eleanor responded. Her mind made up, Mrs. Struthio selected a rotisserie chicken from the display, which she subjected to the same careful inspection as she had everything else. They would have this for lunch, she decided, and take advantage of the time they saved to see if Mr. Struthio needed any help in the fields.

Her shopping complete, Mrs. Struthio and Eleanor waited in the obscenely long check-out line, at the end of which the cashier seemed to find it necessary to comment on each purchase. This sort of forced social interaction would ordinarily annoy Mrs. Struthio, but a combination of anticipation for tonight and the pleasure she felt at seeing her daughter so obedient had put her in a good mood, so she didn't particularly mind making small talk just this once. Once the purchases were all placed in the canvas bags she had brought from home, Mrs. Struthio had Eleanor bring the car to the front of the store, and loaded it there. Taking care to return the cart to the row Eleanor had gotten it from, she returned to the car, the passenger-side door shutting behind her with a satisfying *click*. They sat in silence once more as Eleanor cautiously pulled out of the parking lot. Once they hit the paved road marking the start of their 45-minute drive home, Eleanor spoke.

"Mom, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, dear anything." Mrs. Struthio replied. Eleanor let out a bark of laughter at that, which she unsuccessfully attempted to disguise as a cough.

"You don't really believe all of this... doomsday stuff, do you?"

Mrs. Struthio didn't respond right away. Rather, she found that she couldn't. She pursed her lips, took a shaky breath, and replied.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean, darling."

Eleanor seemed to sense her mother's shift in attitude, and her voice took on a placating tone.

"I mean this end of the world crap... I mean, you can't *really* think the world's going to end tonight. I know that dad buys into it, but you're—"

"That's enough." Mrs. Struthio interrupted, her fury running cold, "Pull over, Eleanor."

Eleanor cast her a nervous glance, but pulled over obediently. Once the car had come to a stop on the shoulder of an empty road lined on either side by soybean fields, Mrs. Struthio opened the car door without saying a word and stepped out. She paused for a moment, took another shaky breath, and reminded herself. *She's just a child. She doesn't know any better*, before circling over to the driver's side of the car and jerking the door open. Eleanor gave her a startled look, as if the girl had not expected this reaction. *What a fool*, Mrs. Struthio thought viciously, *what else could she have expected?* And suddenly, she felt rather foolish herself; it was her fault for sending Eleanor for a public education - she had made all sorts of unsavory friends there, who filled her head with nonsense.

"Get out," Mrs. Struthio commanded. Eleanor scrambled to obey. "I will drive us the rest of the way." Eleanor made her way around the car as Mrs. Struthio seethed in the driver's seat. She closed the door cautiously behind her, and the drive home was finished in complete silence. Mrs. Struthio had meant to scold Eleanor properly when they arrived home, but the girl was used to this pattern and fled upstairs the moment the station wagon stopped. Mrs. Struthio had half a mind to go after her, but stopped herself. The girl would realize how wrong she was tonight, and

she had to come down to eat eventually. Besides, the upstairs of the house was Eleanor's realm - any encroachment into it left Mrs. Struthio with a queasy feeling in her stomach.

Instead, she stalked to the back of the car, her cold fury boiling once more as she unpacked their groceries. The rotisserie chicken was not necessary after all, as it seemed Eleanor would not be coming down for lunch. Mrs. Struthio set it to chill in the fridge and decided to make it into chicken salad for their dinner. Eleanor hated mayonnaise, but she shouldn't have stormed off like that if she wished to have a say in dinner. She put the coffee and sardines in the pantry, and brought the great sacks of flour and beans down into the cellar. It had been carefully waterproofed by Mr. Struthio, and in it were rows of metal shelving holding all types of nonperishable foods, most of them sealed by the Struthios themselves into a colorful range of resealable glass jars. She put the flour and beans on their respective shelves and clapped her hands several times to shake the residual flour off them. With her shopping put away, she went back upstairs to her kitchen and brewed herself another cup of coffee. She really *should* cut back on the amount she was drinking, but the day had taken a stressful turn with her daughter's poor attitude - she needed a hot drink to calm her down. She sat at the coffee table in the living room and sipped her coffee, thinking of her plans for dinner tonight. They would have baked potatoes to go with the chicken salad, she decided, and they would use the rest of the bread she had made this morning to make chicken salad sandwiches.

Mrs. Struthio finished her coffee and walked to the sink, where she set to cleaning the mug alongside this morning's dishes. She had only the drinking glasses left when she heard Mr. Struthio come in, his presence announced by the stomping of his boots as he tried to shake the mud off them and punctuated by his frustrated sighs as he found his efforts fruitless. He loudly made his way into the living room, and his wife heard a loud "oomph!" as he threw himself into

his armchair. Mrs. Struthio could not help but worry whether he had taken off his boots before coming out of the mudroom. After she finished the dishes, she took down an apple from the fruit basket and cut it into neat slices, which she arranged in one of her bone china bowls. She rinsed the knife and put it away before bringing the bowl of fruit out to Mr. Struthio and perching on the edge of the matching chaise lounge. As Mr. Struthio grunted his appreciation and ate the apple slices, Mrs. Struthio found herself fuming once more about Eleanor's behavior.

“That girl,” she began the moment her husband had finished his apple, “I’ll just say, thank goodness this will all be over soon - those school friends of hers really are *such* a terrible influence on her!”

“What’s she done now?” Mr. Struthio asked, ignoring the linen napkin that Mrs. Struthio had brought in favor of wiping his fingers on his pants.

“She asked me if I *really* think the world will end tonight! Can you believe the nerve of her? You were right with what you said this morning - starting tomorrow, we’ll whip her into shape.” The high-pitched stream of venom coming from Mrs. Struthio’s mouth showed no signs of stopping. Mr. Struthio reverted to his preferred method of communication with his wife, giving a short grunt of acknowledgement whenever she paused for breath. By the time Mrs. Struthio had worn herself out, it was time to make dinner. As she picked up the bowl, she realized, perhaps belatedly, that she had forgotten to ask her husband about his own day. Initially, she felt a prick of guilt, but by the time she got to the kitchen, she had reasoned to herself that if he had had anything important to tell her, surely Mr. Struthio would have brought it up on his own. Feeling once more immensely satisfied with herself, Mrs. Struthio washed the bowl and set herself to making the chicken salad sandwiches for their dinner.

By the time that the baked potatoes were finished and the sandwiches were artfully arranged on the silver serving platter, it was after sunset, and the clock read 9:00. Mrs. Struthio was struck by a sudden worry that if she did not hurry up with dinner, they would not have time to properly enjoy the end of the world. Rushing the plates into the dining room, she called for Eleanor and Mr. Struthio before returning to fetch the tableware. When she returned to the dining room, Mr. Struthio was in his usual seat at the head of the table, but Eleanor was absent.

“Where is Eleanor?” Mrs. Struthio asked her husband as she straightened the forks and knives in their places.

“Probably upstairs,” Mr. Struthio responded, “I didn’t hear her come down.”

With her anger once again roused, Mrs. Struthio all but flew to the foot of the stairs that led up to the second floor.

“Eleanor!” she shouted, “Eleanor!” Left without a response, Mrs. Struthio set one foot on the first step before she hesitated. The second floor was irrefutably Eleanor’s - she couldn’t help but feel that if she climbed up the steps, she would be an intruder in her own home.

“Eleanor!” she cried once more. It was clear that the girl had no intention of coming down on her own, forcing Mrs. Struthio to ascend the stairs into a foreign land. It was notably warmer up here - if she hadn’t been so intent on going down again as soon as possible, Mrs. Struthio would have been tempted to shed her cardigan. Mrs. Struthio picked her way carefully down the hallway to Eleanor’s room, which sat opposite the library. If she wasn’t in one, she was likely to be in the other. By the time that she raised her knuckles to rap at Eleanor’s door, Mrs. Struthio felt as if she had swallowed a large stone.

“Eleanor.” Mrs. Struthio was careful not to shout this time, instead keeping her voice stern and low. The door creaked open to reveal Eleanor. She had already changed into her

pyjamas, Mrs. Struthio thought as she plastered on a tight smile. “Eleanor, didn’t you hear me? It’s time for dinner. Come down, now, I’ve made chicken salad sandwiches.”

Eleanor paused for a moment, eyeing her mother cautiously, but experience had taught her by now that it was easier to go along than resist. She croaked out a hoarse “Alright,” and followed her mother down the stairs. While it took every ounce of willpower Mrs. Struthio had not to fly down them, Eleanor seemed hesitant to leave. The girl had the nerve to pause and glance back up when she was finally on the ground floor, and Mrs. Struthio thought furiously that the baked potatoes might be getting cold. By the time that they finally returned to the dining room table, Mr. Struthio had already finished at least half of a sandwich, judging by the crumbs and smeared mayonnaise on his plate. Eleanor and Mrs. Struthio each took their seats on either side of the head of the table.

Mr. Struthio placed a baked potato on Eleanor’s plate, which earned him a shy smile. With great satisfaction, Mrs. Struthio placed half of a chicken salad sandwich next to it. Eleanor glanced at her nervously, but didn’t say anything. They ate in near-complete silence, the only interruption the sound of silverware scraping ceramic. Mr. Struthio ate with gusto, polishing off another whole sandwich and two baked potatoes. Mrs. Struthio ate one of each, but found her chicken salad had a bit too much mayonnaise on it, so she left one corner uneaten. Eleanor took a few polite bites of her sandwich before dismissing it in favor of the potatoes, which she had two of. Mrs. Struthio wanted to scold her about wasting food, but considering her own unfinished sandwich, she decided against it. Mr. Struthio’s radio channel had said that the world would end at 11:03 PM, and the clock said that it was already 10:48. Not bothering to clean up after dinner just yet, Mrs. Struthio ushered her husband outside. She tried to do the same with Eleanor, but

the girl muttered that she had forgotten her camera in her room and wanted to take pictures.

Before Mrs. Struthio could object, the girl had once again vanished.

Refusing to let herself worry about trivial nonsense such as her daughter's whereabouts, Mrs. Struthio strode outside with two bowls of chocolate ice cream and joined her husband on the porch. She handed one bowl to Mr. Struthio and sat down next to him in their matching iron rocking chairs. Mr. Struthio had brought out the red battery-operated radio and set it between the chairs - the staticky, male voice was answering calls from people like the Struthios, who kept their ears to the ground and were prepared for the days to come. Mrs. Struthio rocked her chair back and forth, pushing the quickly melting ice cream around with her spoon. Mr. Struthio was uncharacteristically hesitant to eat his own, instead setting the bowl in his lap and staring determinedly ahead into the darkness as he listened to the man on the radio. The man on the radio spoke in a reassuring, authoritative voice. He reminded listeners, such as the Struthios, that they had nothing to fear; they had been well-prepared for this day, and all that they needed to do now was sit and observe. The man on the radio carried on like that for a while, his voice occasionally rising to a frenzied pitch. As the clock slowly inched towards 11:03, this frenzy increased, as did the frequency with which Mrs. Struthio rocked her chair back and forth. She was undeniably anxious at this point, unsure of what would happen.

Finally, as 11:02 wound down, the man on the radio announced, "This is it, folks!" and began counting down from 30. Mrs. Struthio did not notice the vice-like grip that her husband had developed on his bowl of melting ice cream, too preoccupied with the pounding in her chest. She listened with razor focus as the man on the radio reached twenty, and then ten, and three, two, and one...

Suddenly, on the horizon far away, at the edge of their sight, Mr. and Mrs. Struthio watched absolutely nothing happen.

They sat still for a moment, listening to the man on the radio spout an explanation that he must have gotten the date wrong, he would check his calculations once more, and come back to tell them when the world would *really* end tomorrow morning. Then he hurriedly bid his audience goodbye, signing off before he had to answer the angry callers that had no doubt phoned in. In years past, the Struthios might have been among them, Mr. Struthio angrily storming into the house and calling in from the landline. But now, there seemed to be a quiet sort of acceptance between them, at least for the moment. In the morning, there would be shouting and bone-chine bowls thrown. But tonight, the two of them sat in silence as they listened to toads and crickets harmonize in the late summer night. Neither of them knew how long they sat there. By the time that Mrs. Struthio came back to her senses, the ice cream had long melted, and the moon was high in the sky, illuminating the field in a soft silver light.

“I suppose I should get Eleanor’s lunch for tomorrow ready.” Mrs. Struthio finally said, her voice wavering. Mr. Struthio was quiet for a moment, finally speaking just when Mrs. Struthio was about to repeat herself.

“Yes.” Another silence. “I’m going to bed.”

And he did. Mr. Struthio placed his bowl full of melted chocolate ice cream on the porch and went inside, presumably to wash his face and change into his night clothes. Mrs. Struthio lingered for a moment before she did the same. The ice cream would doubtless attract wasps in the morning, but Mrs. Struthio found that she was too heavy with disappointment to care.

As she walked past the dining room, she saw that Eleanor had cleaned up after dinner. Eleanor stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room, still as a statue. The two stared at each other for a moment before Eleanor timidly called, “Mom?”

Mrs. Struthio felt a wave of sudden, irrepressible anger. *The world had not ended because Eleanor forced me to go upstairs to fetch her for dinner.* Mrs. Struthio was sure of it. She had been forced into Eleanor’s reality, and now she could not leave. In the proper reality, the one downstairs, the world had surely ended. But they were now trapped in Eleanor’s reality, she thought bitterly. In Eleanor’s reality, the world had not ended, and tomorrow she would go to her awful school with her awful friends, where they filled their heads with so much nonsense that they came home spewing it back up. Mrs. Struthio had half a mind to scold Eleanor for this, but as quickly as it had vanished, the heavy feeling of exhaustion washed over her again. Instead, she turned away from Eleanor and followed her husband to bed.