

A Cold, Dark Future

By Victoria Baranova, Year 9T

When Valeria was a little girl, her grandfather would tell her stories about the olden days, a time before the sky was filled with ash and the whole planet became a cold, barren wasteland. The Earth used to be bright and warm, lit up by the sun, with different seasons and different weather. It used to be beautiful and ever-changing, or so she was told. Valeria herself was born into this world, as had everyone in her generation.

(Not that she would know, of course, she had never met anyone her age. Perhaps she was the youngest person left alive.)

As to what triggered 'the end of the world', as she supposed scientists would have called it back when the event was a mere theory, the answer was a simple, two-word phrase - The Eruption.

According to her grandfather, there once was a glorious country called the United States of America, the land of the free. She guessed that's what she was - an American, though nationalities stopped mattering long ago. The place they lived now was once the state of Wyoming, home to the Yellowstone National Park, named after the Yellowstone Supervolcano which caused The Eruption.

More than once, she mentally cursed her grandfather for being so damn stubborn and refusing to move further away from the epicenter. He claimed that he couldn't abandon his home, the place where he grew up, where he raised his children and where he was now raising Valeria.

She personally thought it was stupid. There was little left of Wyoming, of the USA. Wouldn't it be better for both of them to go somewhere far, far away, to a place which was at least somewhat safer?

She'd often fall asleep staring at the tattered map of the world which hung above her cot down in their bunker and wondering what life was like for possible survivors in Australia or Russia or South Africa. It wasn't great anywhere in the world, that much she knew, but surely, anything would be an improvement from next door to Yellowstone, right?

"I was in the navy when I was a young man," she remembered her grandfather saying. Great, she would think to herself, let's find a boat, or build one if we can't find one. Let's cross the Pacific or the Atlantic and create a new home in a better place,

Her grandfather's stories of the past used to fill her with wonder and joy and hope of one day experiencing such a world, a world with no gas masks or bunkers or air filters. A world with real food and clean water and people other than her grandfather. But she was now eighteen years old and not so naive as to dream that this could somehow be fixed. Now, those stories just filled her with nostalgia for something she had never experienced.

With that longing pushed to the back of her consciousness, she thoughtlessly followed her daily routine of leaving their bunker and stumbling around the ruins of what once was a great city in search of supplies, later returning home and helping can food, filter water and dispose of waste.

In the distance, she spotted a tiny stream of water and rushed over to it, praying that it wasn't just a mirage of her exhausted mind. The stream was real, and surprisingly deep too, but it was black and filled with rubbish and debris, and yet that was expected. Naturally clean drinkable water was unheard of in the past thirty-something years, and Valeria found it hard to believe that they used to sell it by the barrel in supermarkets. That people would throw away half-empty bottles with no regard.

Were the people of the past really so careless? Did they truly own so much that they did not care about something as meaningless as a cup of water or a hot meal? Surely, that wasn't true, right?

Who was she kidding, of course it was. She heard enough tales to know as much. It was those people who were dirtying the planet long before any volcanic eruption.

Her grandfather kept an extensive collection of books, articles, newspaper clippings, any and all sources of information that could be salvaged after the Internet went down. Desperate for hints of what the world used to be like, young Valeria would pour over them for hours in dim candlelight.

More often than not, she would find records and statistics of how man-made pollution contributed to global warming, how much plastic there was in the oceans, how many organisms went extinct as a result of overhunting and deforestation. Half the time, she didn't know what a good portion of the words she read meant, but she got the general picture.

No matter what her grandfather loved to claim, the world thirty years ago was not perfect, far from it, in fact. Prior to The Eruption, the air still wasn't completely clean and there were people with no food or clean water. The only difference now was that the hierarchy was

gone, no one was superior. It didn't matter who you were before, now everyone was in the same leaking, ash-filled boat

Suddenly, Valeria realised just how long she was standing there, lost deep in thought. Anything could have happened to her in that time. She could have been attacked, whether it be by a gang of marauders who no doubt stalked the deserted streets, or some poor mutated animal that somehow survived this long, and she wouldn't have even been able to put it out of its misery with her pocket knife, which she just remembered she left on the dining table in the bunker where she was sharpening it against the bottom of a mug.

She shook her head to fully clear it and, as she filled up the four water canisters she had brought with her and began the trip back home - she spent way too long outside already - some of her grandfather's old words rang through her head:

"Now is not the time to dwell on the past, Little Val. In our world, all we can do is focus on surviving the present and hope that one day, we will see a better future."