

Natural Selection Excerpt: A Butterfly in Peking

My brother and I cower behind my older cousin as she strides with long steps toward the foreman at the Corporation Farm. The foreman slouches, legs spread apart, atop an ATV with a radio strapped to his head. He oversees several huge vehicles that worm their way across the vast field, tilling and seeding. I fix on his sun burnt belly, distended under a shirt stained with grease and old food. Indolent eyes flicker across us like a scorching flame. "What have we here?" he bellows. "Urchins for dinner?"

I shrink back. Greasy black hair coils like knotted rope to his shoulders. He looks like the Techno my cousin just killed and in sudden panic I wonder if he knows. She raises her chest and tilts her head back proudly. Her face is smeared with dirt and her hair is matted and tangled with leaves from spending the night in the forest. Backlit, her chaotic hair seems to give off its own light, as though it's been dipped in heaven. She says in a clear voice, "Techno vigilantes raided our farm and killed our parents."

The foreman snorts. "Then you must be little Greenies to barbecue on a skewer—"

"We're *children*," she counters. "We have nowhere else to go. If you turn us away you'll be sentencing us to sure death. They don't care who they kill. Please, you must help us." Her hands reach out in supplication. "We work hard and we don't eat much."

The foreman's gaze softens and his gaze sweeps her body, eyes devouring her. She's charmed the beast with her precocious tongue and he takes us into his lair.

Φ

I gaze at the flat horizon that trembles in the blistering heat. The sun beats down on me and the rain-saturated field. The workmen and women have left the shiny beetles slumbering in a neat row as they retire inside. My cousin and I weed the hardpan and my younger brother sweeps the kitchen floor, while they drink in the cool interior of the corporation farm workhouse and complain loudly about the poor conditions. I can hear them from here. Too little food, too much work, they shout. They argue about the revolution. The breeze flings their words in my direction. "You're a God-damned Greenie, Birch. They're destroying our society—"

"They're saving the fucking planet!"

"Oh, yeah? Not until they fuck all of us first!"

"Look around you. We're already fucked. Technos are pissing away this planet—"

Chairs scrape. I brace myself for the inevitable brawl. Other raised voices join in. Soon they will spill out of the barracks, fists flying.

Shielding my eyes from the sun, I watch my cousin dance lightly over the clods of dirt to the cistern outside the kitchen for a drink of water. The flush of heat glows on her face. Ignoring the commotion inside, she waves to me and her smile draws one out from

me. A gust of wind blows up from behind, dulling the voices inside. I smell rain. The distant roll of thunder murmurs of a coming storm.

It is her thirteenth birthday today. No one will know, and I wipe the surging pleasure from my mind. There will be no birthday cake. No presents. At least we are alive and safe. That is her present. The revolution, which sweeps the country like a violent storm, carves cities into rubble. It casts families across the landscape like pebbles in a rough sea. It left our parents dead in its wake, made my cousin a killer and us three orphaned itinerants, fleeing here with the hope of shelter.

She raises a cup of water from the cistern to her mouth, then lets it drop and runs into the kitchen. I'm annoyed that she has abandoned me to tend the field alone. The workhouse has grown quiet. Perhaps the workers have all fallen into a drunken stupor. The gusts rise to an open-mouthed roar and sting my eyes with dust. Coal-black clouds chase each other like predators. After a while I walk slowly to the kitchen, shielding my eyes from the flying grit.

Hearing malicious laughter within, I hesitate at the open door then force myself to creep forward. I peer around the threshold then freeze, stiff with fear. My brother huddles, naked, on the floor. His dark clothes lie strewn like dried blood at a slaughter. My cousin writhes against the strong hold of several men. Her face is pale with alarm and her eyes dark with terror. They laugh and rip off her clothes. A large man, naked from the waist down, lurches toward her and growls in a drunken slur, "Here's the witch who convinced our piss-pot foreman to give away our food! Well, here's some dessert for you!" He drives into her, rough and insistent, his grunts to her cries a discordant duet of lust and pain.

Someone points to me. "Look! The other kid!" They all turn. For a brief moment — an eternity — my eyes lock with hers. They plead for my help.

I bolt. Her screams chase me stumbling across the uneven soil, tripping on the ruts, refusing to glance back. My face hits the ground. I scramble up, taste dirt in my mouth, and fight into a gallop. Gulping in air. Ears ringing. Eyes blurred with tears. Nose bleeding.

Run. Stinking son of a bitch. Run. Run.

I've left her there, screaming. And, because I didn't stay to hear the screams end, they never will. I hide, shivering in the forest, as the earth grows black and rain pelts me. The onslaught is over in minutes. It leaves me limp like rotting vegetation as I watch the shafts of sunlight pierce the dark mantle and touch the landscape with an unearthly glow. I inhale the skunky smell of marsh plants and imagine her ravaged body discarded on the rubbish pile like old meat. As the shadows of the afternoon enfold me in their skeletal embrace, I stumble out of my garden of moss and ferns and scuttle over the vast field, hoping no one will see me. I slide into hardpan pools and the wet clay clings to my boots and weighs me down.

When I creep into the kitchen, I find her curled like a wounded deer on the floor where they've left her. My brother lies pressed against her, asleep, and she strokes his whimpering face. I want to embrace her, let her cry in my arms. Instead I turn my head away and stand fixed like a stone, cold and heavy. I cannot gaze into her sunken eyes. They sting my soul.

When she finally raises herself off the floor without my help, she scoops my little brother in her thin arms, takes up her tattered clothes and limps back to the sleeping barracks. She does not look back to see if I'm following.

The days bleed into months and she appears unharmed, looking like she always did, face quietly sanguine and eyes glowing like a warm campfire. But I sense her distance. My little brother clings to her. I avoid them both. When our eyes meet one day, I imagine reproach in hers but know their gaze only reflects my own emptiness. I perceive in that ethereal look that they've molested her and probably my brother several times since.

When I'm not working I crawl and hide under the porch floorboards where the dirt smells acrid and I spy on the workers from inside my dark enclave. I feel cursed in my fortune. Am I successfully evading them or do the bastards leave me alone because they sense my worthlessness? I crouch there and recite poetry like her bedtime stories to us. She is silent now. After kissing my brother on the forehead and wishing me a good night, she slips quietly into her bed. I lie stiff under the mouldy covers and listen to her hitched breathing in the bed beside me. I know she's crying herself to sleep.

Now I crouch under the porch with aching knees and recite her favourite poem like a mantra:

To see a world in a grain of sand, and Heaven in a wild flower.

Hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.

He who binds himself to a joy does the winged life destroy;

He who kisses the joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise.

Φ

When the Gaians liberate the Techno Corporation Farm, I return to the new city, which enjoys a peace, disrupted only by the occasional sniper — disgruntled Techno reactionaries who lurk and take pot shots at anyone. My brother returns to his schooling and my cousin and I find a livelihood under the new regime.

I embrace the Green science and after a time become a leader in my field, giving papers at conferences and overseeing an elite cadre of researchers. Feeling secure in my growing prominence, I become daring in my work. I invoke the long abandoned chaos theory and apply it to my models of ecosystem behaviour. The signature of chaos appeals to me, how the subtle effect of a single event has the potential to spiral into overwhelming and irrevocable change. Chaoticists call it the Butterfly Effect: sensitive dependence on initial conditions, based on the strange notion that a butterfly stirring the

air in Peking today could set off a tornado in Texas next month. I recognize its hand in everything I see—including the behaviour of my cousin. I observe how the imperceptible mark of that initial disturbance has with time cascaded into a turbulent squall. As though a wounded bird thrashes, trapped within her, its wings smashing her insides more violently with every breath she draws in.

Seeking obscurity, she finds a position far beneath her capacity as a plant biologist in the Department of Industrial Ecology and sinks into oblivion. I see little of her, but there is seldom a moment when I do not think of her. While my busy lecture tour rarely gives me time to entertain in my penthouse suite, she languishes in the poor section of town with the bus driver she married and two wild-haired children. Is she happy?

Φ

The day I find the courage to visit her, I feel excited and nervous like a child. I stride toward the D.I.E. building entrance, bubbling with things to share with her. Once inside I see her waiting patiently for me in the large mall. She turns and smiles. It draws one out from me.

A loud report jolts me. She jerks back with an expression of surprise then falls, sprawling unnaturally on the floor as a red flower spreads over her breast. A woman screams and flings her hands to her mouth.

As others chase the sniper, I stand fixed like a cold stone and watch her gasp her last breaths then shiver. Her eyes flicker like a dying flame, then the light in them takes flight and her blank gaze upward is still like a dark pool. My heart beats like a mallet and I ache with a million unfinished sentences.

Φ

I scour the chaos for those fragments of memory, taped together by longing, and see her as she once was, as she always was. She was my beautiful cousin, and when we were still children, she killed for us. Using the hunting bow her father gave her, she slew a man who charged at us with a knife, the same one he'd used to kill our parents. When my brother was attacked, she flew to his aid and threw herself into a den of assault. Then, when she pleaded for my help, I ran away.

I was just a boy, only ten years old. Now I know better. The revolution defined what I am. She faced fear head on, bravely pushed it aside and rose to the call. I let fear chase me away.

Now, I wander dark shores, stranded in that moment of agony, still hearing her screams.