

The Bubble

And I could breathe again.

I opened my eyes and found myself in college, the boy's hands resting on my arms. He looked mildly concerned, but I could tell it was just airs; in truth he was perfectly calm, having familiarised himself with my panic attacks earlier that year.

“You okay, Kal?” Ted asked me. He took my clammy hands in his and gently supported them as my shaking subsided. I nodded and reached into my satchel for the iced tea I had prepared the night before. I was still shaking a little, as I attempted to trespass the flask in my hands. Ted removed it, pouring the cool amber liquid into the vessel's accompanying cup. The refreshing jasmine tea, chilled by the ice rattling within, allowed me to finally speak.

“I'm sorry, I hate being such a fuss,” I muttered, taking back the flask and securing its lid. “Thanks, though.”

“Kallie, don't be silly. If you need help, I'm here to give it to you. It's no inconvenience, you really don't need to apologise...”

“I know, I know, I just—” he took my arm and pulled me up out of the chair. “I'm hungry,” I said, blushing a little. I looked at my watch; it was a little after 1PM, and I had no classes until 3:15.

The corridor was mostly empty at this time of day, those students who were in lectures would be kept in the teaching rooms for another ten minutes or so and it being late spring meant the majority of those who had free periods would be sitting on the grass outside, enjoying the sunshine between the brief flash showers characteristic of April. Nevertheless, we preferred to remain indoors ever since 'The Event' that led to my anxiety. The fractals and recursion that had plagued me ever since I tried that damn drug had kept me up at night for months now, and so I often turned to Ted to distract me via text whenever I couldn't sleep, preferring his conversation to thinking about the things that continued to eat away at my sanity.

Ted was a boy I liked. I was sure he knew, but he'd never done anything about it so I assumed he didn't feel the same way. Maybe my girlfriend put him off, but we were all on the same page about our open relationship. Ted loved to read fantasy books and comics, I knew, and liked to embellish his life with tropes and concepts from the stories he had recently been reading. Of late, this had manifested as a declaration that he was a mind reader. He called it 'Perception', and described it as a sense of understanding those around him in a deeper way than is normal. I remained skeptical of such nonsense, calling it 'empathy', and accusing him of embellishment.

Before long, we were sat in a nearby empty teaching room with our greasy cafeteria lunch. Ted had been quiet for a little while, staring off into the distance, so I dug him in the side of the ribs with my elbow.

“Whatcha thinkin' bout?” I asked melodically. He almost choked on a piece of potato.

“Damn, girl, you nearly killed me!” he joked, before his face grew a little more serious. He took a breath, as if anticipating a difficult conversation. “Something's wrong, it has been since you had that panic attack.”

Frowning, I finished my mouthful of bread and fries, and also became serious. “What is it? Did I do something to upset you?”

“No! No, nothing like that. It's just, right when your panic attack struck, I couldn't breathe, and I felt everyone in the nearby classroom thinking the same thing.”

I suppose my inevitable dismissal of his 'Perception' is why he felt the conversation would be somewhat difficult. I rolled my eyes and groaned. “Not this shit again. What was it this time? *She's never coming back? GET DOWN Rotisserie Equine? Oh no, I unseated my M-Rotor*, perhaps?”

“No, I'm serious, something happened. Nothing about that webcomic 'being real'. This actually happened, I swear. They were all thinking something like... *How did I get here? Or Where am I?* Even you, Kal, you thought it too.”

“Well now I KNOW you're making it up. I didn't think any such thing, I was too busy freaking out about loops and shit!”

He grew concerned again. “You mean, you don't remember? I thought it was weird that nobody seemed to react to anything after they thought that, but if they don't remember what happened...”

I'd had enough of it, though, so I threw my sandwich in the bin and decided to go look for someone else to hang out with. The door almost closed behind me before Ted pulled it open again, following me out of the room while hastily reseating his jacket.

“Kallie, wait up,” he panted, “I didn't mean to piss you off, come on.” I rounded on him.

“Ted, are you seriously suggesting I take you seriously after you essentially just tried to turn one of my panic attacks into one of your silly little fantasy games? We don't live in some magical universe filled with goblins from a children's card game, you fucking ass!” I shouted, turning back to head for the main doors. Ted still followed me, attempting to explain that he wasn't saying that at all, blah, blah, blah. I suppose in order for the universe to make things worse, this was the moment that Cera alighted from the staircase directly in front of us, and her particular form of bubbly personality was the last thing I needed right now.

“Guys! Hi! Teddy, I was just looking for you!” She shrieked, descending on us for the traditional hugs that passed for currency in this place. “I did that thing you said I could do!”

“Perceiving? Is that the thing you mean?” Ted replied.

“Yup! I did that. First everyone couldn't breathe, then they were all confused and then they all forgot about it!” she said, clapping. “But what do you think it means?”

“It means you're both fucking assholes, that's what it means! You've planned this, obviously.” I shouted, storming out into the now overcast spring weather. “I'm done with this, leave me alone.” People had begun to shuffle to and from their lectures, and amiable chatter could be heard from all around me. I needed to find somewhere quiet to sit down and fume, so I made a beeline for the smokers' area and fished through my satchel for my 3DS.

A couple fictional fights later, a girl called my name.

“You doing okay? Do you have a lecture or anything?” She asked as she sat down next to me.

“You really should quit, Emma,” I said as she began to roll a cigarette.

“I know,” she replied.

“If I weren't such a dreadfully nice person I would take a deep breath and blow all that tobacco away,” I commented.

“I know.” She took my hand and asked me again, “Kallie, are you okay?”

I sighed heavily, folding my 3DS, and let go of her hand. I rested my head on her shoulder. “Just some people I know being annoying,” I flattened my lips and blew hard, making my lips rumble. “Neigh,” I said, knowing how my girlfriend loved it when I was being silly. We smiled at each other.

“Do you have any lectures?” Emma asked, for the second time.

I shook my head, and so she took my hand and led me across the road to the convenience store that had opened up within the college grounds the previous year. It was predictably quiet in there, just a few students who were filling paper bags with cheap sweets. It began to rain as we entered.

“I need to get some more baccy,” Emma said, and I released her hand from mine to go browsing amongst the snacks I probably shouldn't buy. There was a flash from outside, and thunder rumbled a second later. The rain had become incredibly heavy, and rivers had begun flowing across the road.

“I guess we should stay in here for a bit, then?” I suggested, and the cashier nodded at me to say that he didn't mind us lingering in the store for longer than strictly necessary. Emma returned to my side with an unheated pastry, and so I took a seat by the store's microwave while she cooked it. With science. As my gaze returned to the rain outside, I realised I felt a lot more calm here with Emma than I did with Ted. *Perhaps it's for the best that I didn't make a move on him*, I resolved. *There's never any drama with Emma, and I don't want to have to put her out by complaining about another partner when we should be smooching.* The water level was rising, outside; the spring weather had turned into something a little more formidable than an April shower.

“I'm glad I don't have a lecture until later!” I laughed, watching as the water level rose to cover a few weeds sticking out of a crack in the pavement.

“Same,” Emma sat down on one of my knees and I put my arm around her for support. “And they have enough supplies here to last a while in the inevitable biblical apocalypse!” Jokes aside, she did seem concerned about the weather too.

At the moment the water level reached that of the curb, something started to rise from the rippling plane of its surface; bowing the water as it strained to break the surface tension. The thing is, the surface never broke. The bulge rising from the water consisted of just that – water. The upper hemisphere spattered as it was struck by raindrops, but remained intact; a perfect sphere of water hovered above the flooded road.

“What the fuck is that?” Ushering Emma off my lap so I could get a better look, I rose to my feet. We peered out through the rivulets of rain rushing down the glass door and observed as more of these spheres rose from the water.

“Some kind of ball? This is weird, this is so weird,” Emma turned to the cashier. “Are you seeing this?” He and the other students who had taken shelter with their strawberry laces and foam bananas stared in shock as the water spilled from the road and over the grass leading to the store. The 'micro wave' broke against the foot of the store's entrance steps. From the shallow plane of water rose yet more water balls.

“They look empty,” said one of the students, “Like a bubble. Look, the rain isn't even splashing the bubble itself, it's just running off.” He was right, like a group of glass orbs the bubbles of water were filled only with air.

“I guess that's how they came up from the grassy bit,” the cashier suggested, “it'd be too shallow for anything else!” The students began to exchange their own theories as to what was happening, ranging from apocalypse theories to ghosts to mere tricks of the light.

“Someone go out there,” a student proposed. “Go touch one, see what they do.”

“Fuck no,” came the general response from most of us, but the cashier decided he was up for it.

“I don't want any of you getting hurt in or around my store, last thing I want is to get closed down. I'll go look and make sure it's safe for you to leave.”

“Maybe we should call the police?” Emma said, grabbing the cashier's arm. “If you think it might not be safe, why put yourself in danger?” She dialed the emergency services, but I doubted there was any way to communicate through the weather. “No signal,” she confirmed.

“That settles it,” said the cashier. “I'm going out there.” He opened the door and descended the steps until he almost reached the water level, where he could be within reach of the nearest bubble without getting his shoes soaked through. He reached out a hand and penetrated the bubble with a few fingers. With a yell, his arm was yanked into the membrane of the bubble, stretching toward it despite how hard he pulled against it. In seconds, the bubble had expanded apparently the equivalent of his body mass, and he was gone.

A couple of the students were yelling, too, and backing away from the door as the bubble came in contact with one of its neighbours. This caused it to expand further, absorbing the second bubble into its surface area.

“Kallie, come away from the door!” Emma grabbed me and pulled me away as the bubble began to swell and absorb the others. As it did so, more began to rise from the water beneath it and join the orb.

“If it keeps expanding, it's going to swallow us all...” I said, and Emma pulled me into a strong embrace. “I'm scared, Emma...”

“Me too,” she kissed me, “but we need to find another way out of here. We can't panic now.” The other students looked at us in dismay.

“Don't panic? *Don't panic?!?*” a boy said. “A dude was just fucking... something! Killed! Gone! What do you *expect* us to do? Stay here?” He pushed out of the doors and beckoned his friends to follow him. “We can just go around it and escape, come on!” he told them. Sure enough, the bubble wasn't yet big enough to block any of us from walking around it.

“We'll go back to the college and tell them what's happening,” a girl said. “Stay here and die, if you want, but we're le-” her comment was cut short by another yell. The boy who panicked had stepped into the water from which the bubbles were rising, and I turned just in time to see him disappear into its depths – or, shallows. The water couldn't have been more than shin-height, and yet his body seemed to fall right through the world.

“Shit. Shit! We can't get across!” the girl yelled and turned back to the store. The bubble

expanded again, as more water added to its surface area, and it came into contact with the back of her head. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she was pulled into the water before she had time to react. Her arms and legs went limp in the instant her brain lost touch with her body, and her neck stretched like spaghetti before the bubble slurped her up.

The remaining two students jumped back in time to avoid the next expansion, and we all retreated to the back of the store.

“We need to find another exit, and something to keep the rain off,” I suggested, and Emma nodded. “You, come with me and we’ll look for an exit. Emma, you take him and find something to shelter us.”

“There’s a way out through the stock room, I did part time here in my first year and I know the staff code,” said the other student, a girl whose name I never learned. Thankfully, the late store owner hadn’t changed it and we were able to find a back exit. Emma handed out a set of forgotten umbrellas from behind the cash register.

“Okay, we need to get somewhere away from water.” Emma said and we opened the back door. I saw the blood drain from my girlfriend’s face. “Th- they’re... everywhere...”

I stepped up behind her and looked out of the door. Huge, spherical bubbles hung in the sky like decorations on a giant tree. Dimples in the topography of the college grounds had created bubbling lakes all around us, making escape impossible, their proximity causing them to rapidly expand with the growing bubbles nearby. The closest two of them snapped together.

I pulled Emma away from the door as fast as I could, but it was too late; the bubble reached into the door frame and gripped my girlfriend by the stomach.

“No!” I shouted, gripping to her as tightly as I could and attempting to wrench her away from the ravenous bauble. She twisted herself around and clutched my face, kissing me one last time before the force of the bubble took her from my life. Nevertheless, I refused to let go of her. One hand still gripping her wrist, I was pulled arm-first into the bubble myself.

In that moment, time slowed like molasses. I felt no wrenching or distortion as the membrane fused with my arm; in fact, I felt nothing at all. My arm was intact, and it was the bubble that was distorting around me. It appeared to be expanding and flattening itself into a plane. It reached toward my face and I felt the skin of the water forcing itself down my throat, into my lungs. The bubble was up to my chest; my arm, breasts, my whole upper torso becoming one with the membrane that was distorting around me. I couldn’t breathe, my lungs gently hugging the surface of the bubble. I began to panic, I instinctively let go of Emma, but realised my hand was gone, and so was she. She was part of the bubble now, and it was taking me as well. The panic grew into fear, and fear into terror as I knew this was the end.

My consciousness, bereft of human form, was now entirely part of the expanding bubble. It flattened into a plane, and I could see shapes as it began to reform into something new. A figure, touching my arm... *Emma? No... that's not her.* The events began to seem like a distant fiction, as my consciousness took a new form. *How did I get here? Where am I?*

The bubble popped.

And I could breathe again.