

The Forced Generation

Before, we were separate.

Separate, but still close. Closer than most siblings. Close enough to always be lumped together.

Horse and carriage. Knife and fork. Jamie and Maz.

We preferred it that way. It meant we got to choose. It wasn't often that we didn't want to be with each other, but there *were* times. Like when we were younger, and Jamie would copy everything I said. Or when we were older, and Maz would follow me around the house, talking about her crush. We annoyed each other, like all siblings do.

They said it would solve everything, that we'd be able to afford things for once.

Think of the car you want, Jamie, Mum would say. After this, we'll be able to afford it.

You've always wanted your own room, haven't you Maz? Dad would smile. After this, you'll have one.

It wasn't just Mum and Dad who told us it was for the best. There were the adverts on TV, the radio, our phones, each one promising us a better world. There were the success stories from East Asia, that we'd swap with our friends at school. There were the announcements; Our Lady appearing on TV each night at eight. Pleading with us to *do what's right*.

The night of the first announcement remains clear in our mind, as though it happened just yesterday. We see it differently now; two perspectives in one. Maz was wedged between Mum and Dad on the sofa, sinking into the gap between the cushions. Jamie was sitting on the floor, his knees tucked into his chest, picking at the threadbare carpet. All of us were ready to hear what Our Lady had to say. It wasn't real, we told ourselves. It *couldn't* be real.

She appeared, Her lined face uncomfortably close to the camera. Every pore, every silver hair, every faint liver spot, visible. She looked too real to *be* real; higher definition than if She were standing in front of you. Her eyes had been edited. They were so dark that it was impossible to tell the iris from the pupil. It gave Her a deathly appearance. It made everything even more uncomfortable. So uncomfortable that Dad cleared his throat, that Mum shifted on the sofa, that we looked to them for reassurance.

Before Our Lady opened Her mouth, before She muttered a word, we knew.

It was our turn.

In the beginning, it was just curiosity. Mum and Dad went along to talks held at the university, and we were left at home. We'd talk about it, but not in a serious way. We'd joke; *You'd be the one they'd get rid of, Jamie. Mum always wanted girls, remember?*

You're kidding, right? I'm first born – the golden boy. You'd be gone in a heartbeat.

We'd strap cushions to our chests, then run at each other. We'd sprint, collide, fall backwards, shrieking with laughter.

Jamie would prance around the house, flicking his non-existent hair, pretending to be me.

Maz would put on my joggers and tuck her hair into her cap, pretending to be *me*.

When Mum and Dad got home after a meeting they'd open a bottle of wine; we'd have hot chocolate. The four of us would sit together in the kitchen, gossiping. It started off light-hearted, with jokes about what they'd seen. *They played the War of the Worlds soundtrack before coming on stage, Dad would laugh. It was meant to get you riled up, but it just made us hysterical. Your mum snorted so loudly when the combined came on stage that people turned and looked. We couldn't get it together. We had to move to the back.*

What did they look like, the combined?

Jamie would always be the one to ask questions. Dad would always be the one to answer.

Normal enough on first glance. But if you looked closely, you could tell something was off. It was their eyes, I think. Or the way they stood. Something wasn't – normal – about them.

Nothing about this is normal, Mum would say.

The talks were held each week. Every Thursday at seven. For the first few months, it was the night we looked forward to most. It was freedom; the house to ourselves and a late night, made better by the laughter when Mum and Dad got back. But, after a while, the gossip stopped being funny. We started to dread Thursdays. We started to tense when we heard the key in the door. We still had our hot chocolates, but the laughter soon stopped. There was no longer anything to joke about.

Kay down the road is considering testing, Mum would say. Her sister's got cancer, terminal. They're saying it can undo that, if it goes well. That she can live a long, healthy life.

What if it goes wrong? Jamie would ask.

Mum and Dad would look at each other, neither of them knowing how to respond.

What would happen to Kay? he'd persist.

Go to bed, you two, Dad would say. It's late.

The talks became more frequent. They were gone four, sometimes five, nights a week. They stopped making us hot chocolate when they got back. There were times that we'd catch them whispering, their heads bent close together. There were times that they'd start crying, that they'd hold us close, tell us how much we meant to them. There were times when we were kept awake at night, listening as they argued.

We shared a room that barely fit two single beds. If we reached out, we could hold hands over the narrow gap that separated us.

Jamie? Maz would whisper once the argument was over.

Yeah? Jamie would whisper back.

Do you think Mum and Dad are going to get divorced?

No, Maz.

They keep arguing.

They love each other. You know that.

Then why—

Go to sleep, Jamie would say. You'll feel better in the morning.

It was what I always said when Maz started questioning things. It was the only way I knew how to answer. I didn't want to lie to her, but I didn't want her knowing, either. It was an awful thing to know. And I knew. Long before she did.

Jamie had worked it out. I see that now; the moment he realised. The night the incentive was introduced, the night parents were told they would be rewarded for their sacrifice, the night Mum and Dad decided they'd go to an extra meeting. I wasn't so smart. I didn't know until they told us. Until we were there, waiting to get tested.

∞

The test centre was disappointing. We'd been expecting something futuristic, straight out of a movie. What we got was a large, stale, village hall. The same village hall in which we'd watched *The Wind in the Willows* performed by the local drama club. Mum and Dad dropped us off at the door. They weren't allowed in, only the children.

There was a circle of folding metal chairs set out in the middle of the hall. We made our way over to them, Maz sitting beside an eight-year-old boy, Jamie beside a girl of a similar age. There were at least twenty of us. No one smiled or said hello. Everyone just sat, waiting. On the walls of the hall were posters, so familiar to us that we didn't need to look at them to know what they said. We could recite each one by memory.

Why live together when you could live as one?

Sick? Find your cure in someone else.

Leave behind the parts of you that hold you back.

Battling mental demons? Start over, live free.

Find your perfect match, and never be alone again.

The posters filled the walls.

Our target group was - arguably - the most pathetic of all. We weren't there for love, or health, or even success. We were there for money. The advertisement didn't say that, obviously. The flyer that was posted through our letterbox, the one that first got Dad's attention, was all about being a responsible parent. Having one fewer child per family could save 58 metric tons of carbon each year. We all knew the facts. We all knew it was 'the right thing to do'. We all knew it was going to 'save our generation'.

And we all knew that none of our parents gave a shit about any of that.

Think of the children, was our poster's tagline.

Think of the money, would have been better.

It was clear from the silence in the hall, from the tear-stained cheeks, that none of us had chosen to be there. We were all under eighteen and all unable to say no. Our parents had convinced themselves they were looking out for us. It wasn't about the huge sum that would appear in their bank accounts once the procedure was over. It was for the greater good. It was for the children.

Our group leader, Taylor, was a combined. She was older than Jamie, but not by much. In her twenties, probably, with thick black hair and deep brown skin. She appeared normal at first, like Dad had said. It was her eyes that gave her away. Light blue and unblinking.

Welcome, she said, her smile wide. *And congratulations for making it this far.*

We looked at each other then, our eyebrows raised. It was hardly an achievement. Everyone was there because their parents wanted money more than they wanted them. If anything, making it that far was a failure.

I'd like to invite you all to close your eyes, Taylor said, as she closed her own. *Let us listen to Our Lady.*

We did as we were told. Everyone in the circle closed their eyes, waiting for Her familiar words.

Man has stretched the limit of the environment. Her voice came from the overhead speakers. *Our resources are depleted and overused.* She paused, the way She always did. We could picture Her; head bowed, like it was at this point in each announcement. She'd look up after her pause and, though we weren't watching her this time, we could all see Her black eyes pleading with the camera. *Do something important*, She said. *Be the change the world needs.*

∞

It happened quickly from that point on.

Mum and Dad chose everything; which parts of us they'd keep, which parts they'd like gone. They chose Maz's body for us to exist in. We don't know what happened to Jamie's. We don't like to think about that. We don't like to think about what happened to the parts of us that are no longer here.

There are unions. Thousands of them, all fighting for us. The combined generation, that's what they call us. We've thought of a better name; the forced generation. The generation of no choice.

There have been uprisings and legal battles, endless amounts of them. In the beginning, we used to get involved. We travelled with a rebellion group, protested all over Europe. After years of fighting, we gave up. We realised that, even if we managed to get through to Our Lady, even if She admitted that what She'd supported, what they'd done to the children, was wrong, there was no going back. We'd get an apology, some money, maybe, but nothing more. We wouldn't get our lives back. No matter how hard we fought.

Combines like us exist all over the world. There's no country left that hasn't introduced the protocol. Not one. We're a doomed generation; a generation that can never fall in love, not properly. Not unless both souls in the body somehow, miraculously, love the same person. Even if they do, the chances are the person they love is a combined, with two souls of their own. The likelihood of the love being reciprocated is near impossible.

We're the generation that can never be happy, not fully. Not unless both souls in the body somehow, extraordinarily, find happiness in the exact same things. At the exact same times. We're the generation who can't think, can't talk, can't *be* who we are. We're the generation that can't exist.

We've chosen to live with it, remembering the days we could hold hands, the days we could walk off when we annoyed each other, the days we didn't hear each thought the other had.

The days each of us existed entirely.

Before, when we were separate.