

Love Thy Neighbour

This is a short, sad story with two happy endings. It centres on a romance which developed in 2092 around the back of The Museum of Pre-Extinct Primitive Morality, between a woman called Eustacia Jacobs and a man known simply as Sallows. It happened across a Blinker, the longest Blinker on planet earth.

A Blinker - or 'Moral Perimeter' - traced the border of a nation state and marked the end of its technologically achieved moral field. The basic principle of the Blinker was thus:

Nobody inside the Blinker could care a jot about anybody outside the Blinker.

So it didn't matter if somebody just outside the Blinker was having their fingernails plucked out, or was being mauled by bears, or was just in need of a little help push-starting their car – the people inside the Blinker just couldn't care less.

They *couldn't*. It was now physically impossible for them to care at all.

They were, indeed, like horses with blinkers on. They were oblivious to outside disturbances. They just trotted on.

Of course, this Blinker hadn't always been there, surrounding the Alpha Amalgam that constituted the former United States of America and European Union, and running in part around the back of The Museum of Pre-Extinct Primitive Morality. It had been a technological solution to an imperfection in the human being.

Much like the toothbrush.

Much like the laser which corrects wonky eyes.

A popular slang term for people living outside of the Blinker was 'Kitties'. Sallows was a Kitty. Nobody knew very much about him. There were many Kitties and nobody knew very much about a lot of them.

Eustacia Jacobs was a citizen of the Alpha Amalgam who could be counted on to do, in any given situation, the most compassionate thing she could possibly think of. Once she had opened

a fortune cookie that had said 'You radiate goodness' and all her friends had agreed it sounded exactly like her.

It made sense that she would wake up most days at 5 o'clock and leave the house straightaway to start the early-mornings shift of just one of her jobs. This job involved clearing up all manner of waste materials excreted by five handicapped old souls, who were no longer, but once, called the Elites. It was Eustacia Jacobs who could be relied on to give them a helping hand in some of the more unsavoury bodily processes. She did it every morning, with no fuss and plenty of passion.

Then she returned home, in the hurried twenty-minute break she had between that job and her next, to breakfast with her father, the ebullient Mr. Jacobs, who she had every intention of making the happiest father in the Alpha Amalgam.

A rich and unshakeable bond between Eustacia Jacobs and Mr. Jacobs had grown out of their shared love of current affairs.

Today she said to him, "Did you see the news? Ha! Another two hundred thou Japs killed, just as I predicted."

Mr. Jacobs waved the air dismissively and grunted. "They got lucky. You watch those Japs, darling. Didn't you see the strategy they pulled in Irkutsk? They bowled out both the Ruskies and a million or more Kitties in one play. My money's certainly behind the Japs! You just watch."

This is how they would discuss international conflict: as if it were football. They were each fans of their favourite superpowers and natural disasters. They both enjoyed a wholesomely aggressive argument, and they would work themselves into quite a frenzy, saying what-I-would-do-if-I-were-them, betting on the outcomes and whatnot.

Their breakfast for today comprised two rashers of bacon, two fried eggs, a hash brown, and two tomatoes fried just the way Eustacia liked them.

The Kitty known simply as Sallows nibbled ineffectually on a sustenance pill that had an aftertaste of bitter oranges. He was half-collapsed against, half-clinging onto the barbed-wire fence which etched out the Blinker just around the back of The Museum of Pre-Extinct Primitive Morality.

Eustacia Jacobs worked as a tour-guide at The Museum of Pre-Extinct Primitive Morality. She had originally applied for the job out of her great respect for the museum, and because she was very fond of the giant near-naked statues standing at the entranceway.

She had a great respect for the museum because she wholeheartedly agreed with the simple philosophy behind the Blinker:

If you can't *do* anything to help somebody on the other side of the world, what the hell's the point in *caring* about them?

And, reasoned Eustacia, it wasn't as if *other* people weren't doing things to sort out the problems of the world. There was the United Humanitarian Organisation, and there was The Red Cross, and there were the Freedom Fighters Against Exploitation. It was just that everybody needed to know their place.

She was fond of the collection of giant near-naked statues standing at the museum's entranceway because they represented liberation.

They were giant men and women, most of whom were chained each to each with tight iron shackles around their hands. Yet four of the giant people had broken free of their chains and were holding their shackles up to the gods in frozen fits of jubilation. The plaque beneath them read:

“NO LONGER EACH OTHER'S SLAVES.”

Dr. Dreyfus Kandikind, 2080

Eustacia Jacobs was grateful for many things in life, but above all else her freedoms.

Today, like every other day, she introduced herself to a coachload of schoolchildren and put them instantly at ease with her tender motherly charm. She introduced them to Dr. Dreyfus Kandikind, who was dead, but who took the form of a recorded holographic projection.

The flickering image of Dr. Dreyfus Kandikind, a wizened, jovial old man with a broad smile, told the assembled schoolchildren:

“Morality, ladies and gentlemen, is a sense. It tells you when you have to do things for other people in the world.

Let's go back in time just a little. Morality used to be a hell of a *slippery old fish!* People used to live by the same wibbly-wobbly instincts which had gotten them grudgingly out of the seas one evolutionary day.

It was not a precise sense, like sight or hearing. And I was working at a time when all non-precise senses were being turned into precise senses. You know, we haven't always had Unambiguous Smell and Quantitative Comparison Taste!

While all our other senses got cleverer and cleverer, morality stayed stupid. We needed some sort of technological solution – a gizmo. Ladies and gentlemen, every other sense had been improved by *gizmos and thingermajigs*.

Yet morality enjoyed the benefit of no gizmo, no thingermajig, and everyone at the beginning of the 21st century was a moral simpleton. Compared to now – and what it means to be an Alpha Amalgamist – they were *morally retarded*. They had no control, no precision. Morally speaking, you or I could not tell them apart from a *dumb beast*.

That's where I moved in, and why we now live with a whole slue of technological solutions to moral problems.

However, this is a museum in memory of the moral simpletons, so that we do not forget how they used to live. One day, nobody will live without the benefit of technological or biological solutions to moral problems, and nobody will live outside of the Blinkers, but for now there are some unfortunates who do. Primitive morality still governs their lives.

Some day, of course, *they will be extinct*. This museum is ready for that day. I hope you find it enlightening.”

The children were then escorted around The Museum of Pre-Extinct Primitive Morality by Eustacia Jacobs, as they completed their worksheets on how the moral revolution had transformed the life of the moral simpleton.

Meanwhile, Sallows was up to entirely nothing. This was a man who had wounds to mark the arduous journey he had taken, a man whose energies had long since been depleted, and who had come to a dead stop.

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Eustacia herded the giggling rabble of children into the first exhibition hall, titled The Daunting Position of the Moral Simpleton.

All a moral simpleton had to go on was his guts. Globalisation had brought billions of people closer together – whether for love or for conflict – but they still only had their guts to rely on.

Take any moral dilemma of the sort frequently sent into tabloid ‘agony aunts’ at the time. A moral simpleton who had to make a decision was forced to consider a range of fragile parameters, including: the combinations of people who would be affected by their actions; the physical and emotional distances between them; and the differing durations of pain and pleasure their actions would evoke. What were needed were surely meticulous mathematical models and algorithms. But what, in actual fact, did the moral simpleton have to aid them in this most complex moral calculus? Just their clumsy old guts.

And boy did their guts make mistakes! They would nonchalantly make decisions that they’d regret for the rest of their lives. They’d make each other cry. They’d wage wars on a whim. And they were always forgetting anniversaries.

No wonder there was money to be made as an agony aunt.

After reading many historical documents on particularly atrocious moral decisions made by moral simpletons, the children filled out their worksheets with answers like this:

23. Give an example of how it would not have been nice to be a moral simpleton.

They used to make their families hurt because they didn’t know how to feel them hurt.

This exhibition hall ended with an interactive demonstration on the first technological solution designed to aid the poor moral simpletons: Enhanced Empathy.

Eustacia chose five lucky children to pass into a special chamber. These were children who had recently been trading Chinese burns and insulting each other’s mothers. Yet as soon as they were inside the special chamber, a transformation took place.

Enhanced Empathy switched on. No longer did they have to rely solely on their guts. This technological solution – this Enhanced Empathy – brought the children into intimate contact with each other’s needs and pains.

To Eustacia it was adorable. The kids asked each other about their *feelings*. They offered each other massages. One child apologised for an offhand insult he’d made three weeks ago.

But this was nothing new to Eustacia, nor to the children. Enhanced Empathy networks were ubiquitous: government officials used them to see issues from different points of view; affluent parents used them to keep a sympathy leash on their children; and couples used them for better sex and fewer tears.

The children’s favourite exhibit was, as usual, on the Army of the Alpha Amalgam, which employed the most advanced version of Enhanced Empathy to keep its soldiers bonded in a web of solidarity. They would do anything to help each other. Their model was the ancient Spartan army, whose soldiers were tightly bound together with love.

The children then explored the exhibition hall titled The Misunderstood Nature of our Moral Instincts.

The original aim of moral revolutionaries such as Dr. Dreyfus Kandikind had been grand and ambitious: to bond every member of the entire human race to each other, with something as precise and powerful as Enhanced Empathy. The fantasy was that, one day, everybody would feel everybody’s joys and everybody’s pains, and any moral problem would be effortlessly solved by something a million times fairer than our temperamental guts.

He had been greatly influenced by the thinking of some notable moral simpletons who had envisaged an ideal morality: Confucius, Jesus, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mills, to name a few. Common to all their philosophies had been one key ingredient, impartiality: that each should be considered as each, that you should love thy neighbour as yourself.

Scientifically, Dr. Kandikind’s goal had been to advance moral processing to the point where it was akin to the human visual cortex, which could integrate millions of retinal impressions into one coherent whole. It was dreamed that one day there could be a coherent world morality built right into everybody’s skull.

But this project had profoundly failed, and Eustacia now asked for one child to volunteer to demonstrate this failure.

The child who volunteered was Joe Bonlodio – the coolest Year 9 in the class, no question about it. He was led into another special chamber, which contained a few monitors and was visible to the other children through a huge perspex window.

Eustacia bit her lip; she hated this part. What happened was that the volunteer – this time, Joe Bonlodio – was presented with some news clips about people in pain. It was as simple as that. But to every

news clip which was presented to him, Joe Bonlodio couldn't help but feel their pain himself, as if they were as dear to him as his mother or father.

A woman was being tortured by the Japanese. Joe Bonlodio reeled.

A Mongolian nomad was on the brink of starvation. All Joe Bonlodio wanted to do was to feed him.

Joe Bonlodio's guts were working overtime and he pounded on the door to get out.

Enough was enough, thought Eustacia, who let him out.

Once out of the chamber, Joe shook his head like a wet dog and was fine again. "It was like I was being punched in the chest by Ryan Thompson," he told the class. "Why would anybody want to feel that?"

The problem with Enhanced Empathy was that it hadn't scaled up. As one child's worksheet went:

24. Why couldn't we just care about everyone in the world in equal measure?

Because of statistics. That's the bad kind of maths. Our brains weren't made to care about 15 billions of other brains.

(Incidentally, the human cost of research into this world morality had been the five now uniquely handicapped 'Elites' who Eustacia Jacobs cared for in her early-mornings/late-nights job - people who truly were keyed into the pain and joy of everybody in the world, and who were almost perpetually vomiting as a result.)

So it had turned out that the humane thing wasn't to get everyone to care about everyone, it was to get everyone to care about fewer people. This was the very subject of the museum's third and last exhibition hall: The Gift of Moral Control.

The error in the reasoning of Jesus et al. had been following *ideals* over *nature*. Impartiality and loving thy neighbour - these were charming romantic ideals which sprung from fertile imaginations, they weren't based on knowledge of human psychology and our animal instincts. The nature in people's guts said quite a different thing to the philosophy in their books. It said: look after yourself, look after your family, your loved ones and your fellow Alpha Amalgamists.

The Blinkers were essentially just carrying the baton on from nature. As had happened throughout history, nature made the suggestions and humans took the hint.

25. Name four things the moral simpletons used to limit who they cared about before Dr. Kandikind invented the Blinkers.

Religions. Cultures. Thick country edges on world maps. A mind trick called Denial.

In the end, Blinkers had come to replace the national borders which globalisation had rendered vague and arbitrary. They were made visceral.

Yet Blinkers had started off small. Eustacia Jacobs now packed the excitable children into a cosy chamber surrounded by a fun-sized and invisible - but reliable - Blinker.

"Right children," said Eustacia soothingly, "I'd like you all to imagine terrible things being done to your parents and your brothers and sisters." They did as instructed, imagining near-unimaginable cruelty being dished out to their relatives.

No problem. No heightened anxiety. No guts. No punch in the chest.

"Now, take a look at this footage taken just last week by the police, showing Somalian immigrant workers being brutally assaulted in a t-shirt factory just two blocks down the road."

The Somalians were being whipped and whacked. They were forced to sleep on top of each other in straw pallets. It should've made any human's skin crawl.

Yet to Eustacia Jacobs and today's children? No punch in the chest, no guts.

Of course, the police had since shut down this t-shirt factory two blocks down the road. Usually the Somalian workers were kept in their own country. The economic benefits of Blinkers were tremendous.

Children invariably went gooey-eyed for private Blinkers. Only the parents of their richest friends could afford these must-have toys.

Once the children had gotten that excitement out of their system, another recording of the dead Dr. Dreyfus Kandikind gave a closing speech.

“Hopefully, ladies and gentlemen, you will now have a better idea of the awful position the moral simpleton was in, and the work we’ve done to implement a more modern morality.

It has been a struggle for freedom. Enhanced Empathy: the freedom to connect. Moral Perimeters: the freedom to control. We are no longer each other’s slaves, unless we choose to be.

Now, it may be the case that the rest of humankind has not yet embraced the benefits of Enhanced Empathy and Moral Perimeters. My sincere hope is that one day they will, and one day this will be a Museum of Extinct Primitive Morality. My dream is freedom for all.

However, if you are listening to this recording then this dream has obviously not yet become a reality, and outside you will be able to see firsthand the border of the first Moral Perimeter ever made. Thank you, I hope you have found this tour instructive.”

“Lunch time!” cried Eustacia Jacobs.

And outside the door to The Museum of Pre-Extinct Primitive Morality, Sallows faintly heard this “Lunch time!” cry ringing with vitality.

After a hearty lunch, the children followed Eustacia Jacobs out to the back of the museum, where they could see the fortified Blinker of the Alpha Amalgam snaking down to the horizon.

It was a spectacle. Thousands of tonnes of barbed wire fences, concrete watchtowers and gun emplacements. Hundreds of swarms of zero-tolerance, zero-empathy soldiers in their jeeps, tanks and helicopters. This militarised Blinker carved the land into two unequal halves.

On one side there were green-lawned detached houses, children riding tandem on bicycles with their parents, and majestic skyscrapers propping up cotton-wool clouds.

The other side was nothing short of an apocalyptic landscape – an almighty mayhem of ruins, turmoil, and men, women and children. To all appearances it looked as if it had been devastated by a series of natural disasters, yet the disasters had only been as natural as the humans who had created them. Nobody cared to count the thousands of Kitties on the abominable side of the fence: some starving, some on the brink of death, some hurling themselves onto the barbed wire fence with their last reserves.

One of these Kitties was clutching onto the barbed wire with a white-knuckled fist and nibbling ineffectually on the sustenance pill with the aftertaste of bitter oranges. He was emaciated and shivering, yet he appeared solemn, patient and defiant. He must have been only five strides away from Eustacia Jacobs, and could hear every word she said to the children, yet needless to say he didn’t receive an introduction.

To Eustacia and the children the misery which piled up to the horizon, yet which began only a stone’s throw away, was nothing to get worked up about.

No guts. No punch in the chest.

At this point Eustacia Jacobs told the children all about the pills they used to be allowed to take in order to briefly – very briefly – cancel out the effect of the Blinker. It had been a punch in the chest all round: an entirely different perspective that brought the psychology of the moral simpletons closer to the visitors than anything else in the museum.

She told them that the pill had in recent years been proscribed, which meant outlawed, partly due to ‘ethical reasons’ and partly due to its purported usage by insider insurgents.

So, no pills and no finale.

The children’s last task was to sketch what they could see in front of them with multicoloured pencils and answer a few final worksheet questions.

56. Why does the rest of the world allow us to have a Blinker?

They need to have our money. We have stronger guns.

Some of the children’s sketches focused on the short stretch of fence running directly behind the museum: this was the ‘First-laid Fence’, the original 100 metres or so where the fencing work had begun almost 20 years ago. It was a simple chainlink fence with slithers of barbed wire on the outside. Whereas most of the Alpha Amalgam’s perimeter had been systematically repaired and reinforced, the First-laid Fence had been preserved. It was a historic site – under Dr. Kandikind’s instruction – which now served as a convenient viewing gallery.

Eustacia had only been 6-years-old when this fence had been erected, but she vaguely remembered that it had provided many an adventure for her and her erstwhile gang. Over the years she had

witnessed the metal rusting, the patrols increasing, and the Kitties coming and going.

Kitties such as Sallows.

The guards would often let the weak ones right up to the fence, like at a zoo, within petting distance. Not that anybody cared to pet them.

As the children wrote and sketched, Eustacia would usually help them out, but today she was curiously distracted. This man at the fence was staring at her and she found herself staring back.

It was not like Eustacia to stare back. Every day people on the other side of the fence would stare at her with their pleading eyes; she never had any problem ignoring them before. They were just figures in the background, shapes moving on a TV that somebody had left on but nobody was watching.

So what was different with this man? He was quivering, like the rest of them, and he was dying, like the rest of them. It wasn't because she felt sorry for him – she couldn't. She took a moment to reflect on it, but all she could come up with was that he was smiling. Faint though it was, there was a smile. She had never seen a smile on one of them before. And it wasn't even directed at her, it was *his*, it was-

“Is he bothering you, Eustacia?” called a voice, breaking her thoughts. This was Private Dominic Wilson, one of the border guards who Eustacia had become quite good friends with during her time at the museum.

“No,” she replied all too quickly.

“If he is, we'll sort him out for you, you know that. He hasn't budged for over ten hours. They call him Sallows.”

“Sallows? Well leave him there, don't do anything for me, Dom.”

Private Dominic Wilson said his goodbyes and went on his way. He full-out fancied Eustacia Jacobs, and he thought he deserved at least a fondle, considering he was a hard-working, affable chap.

He was also an Enhanced Empathy soldier of the Army of the Alpha Amalgam, bonded to his comrades in ways only dreamed of by military leaders of the past. It was rumoured that these soldiers enjoyed killing; this wasn't true, they simply enjoyed looking after each other to the point where, when they killed out of protection, it seemed they were killing out of lust.

As was mentioned before, these soldiers were the fruits of research into a world morality which aimed to have Enhanced Empathy connecting everybody to everybody. Yet this line of research had borne its bad fruit first – its failures, some of whom were still alive today.

The Elites were those five uniquely handicapped old souls who Eustacia Jacobs tended to every early-morning. They were the only five human beings in the world who felt an equal and real moral obligation to absolutely every other human being.

Eustacia Jacobs, who was not nearly so unique, now tended to the Elites again, with renewed spirit and determination.

The fact that they were in constant agony could not possibly be apprehended by Eustacia, for she had been outfitted with a mobile Blinker. Her employers had deemed it cruel to let anyone work with the Elites without a mobile Blinker. While she wore it, just like a watch, she couldn't feel the pain of anybody else in the world – the opposite, in fact, of the Elites.

Criminals often used mobile Blinkers, as did the army.

When Eustacia cared for the Elites, she always did her best. It just so happened that her best couldn't really have been any worse:

She put the telly on for the invalids, and the news went straight to their guts.

She made coffee for herself, and because the Elites knew how the coffee bean growers were treated, this went straight to their guts too.

She made their beds with brand new linen, because it was actually more economical to use new sheets than wash the old. And they knew where this came from too, so it went straight to their guts along with the rest.

This was their daily ordeal. It was hardly Eustacia Jacobs' fault, for she was just doing her job, and was certainly doing her best.

The fact was that nobody really understood the Elites anymore – they were a hangover from the ideals of Jesus, Confucius, Kant and those other moral simpletons. Moral impartiality was just one symptom among many in this secluded and stinky room.

As she did her job and tried her best, Eustacia simply couldn't get out of her mind that character, Sallows, and his faint, incongruous smile.

She was still thinking about Sallows at the dinner table, when Mr. Jacobs tried to steal her attention with talk of the latest military stratagems and death tolls.

“Go Japs! I told you! What did I tell you? My favourite, Commander Rokaki, nuked Irkutsk and culled half the population, no problem, you should have seen their faces! Those Kitties think it *matters!*”

Eustacia laughed, pleasing her father.

On most days Eustacia would debate with her father until she was exhausted, but today she left the table early with the excuse that she needed an early night.

She had no intention of having an early night. Even though Eustacia got into her pyjamas and into her bed, and tried to convince herself that she was going to fall asleep, the image of Sallows wouldn't go away. She could sense him still standing there in exactly the same spot.

And she did live only a short jog away, after all...

Ignoring the cries of the logical side of her brain, Eustacia Jacobs crept out of her house in just her silk pyjamas and ran down the road to The Museum of Pre-Extinct Primitive Morality.

By the time she got there she was panting and panicking, tip-toeing around the back to where the shadowy figure of Sallows still stood, white-knuckled to the rusted barbed wire of the First-laid Fence.

Eustacia thought that perhaps he was asleep. Perhaps he was just crippled. Or maybe even dead.

She cautiously approached, led by her intrigue, seeking that rare smile again. On her side she walked over a well kept, floodlit lawn, past the occasional ornamental tree. There was nothing of this sort behind the historical chainlink fence: only dusty gravel, odd rags of clothes, and this lump of Sallows.

Eustacia Jacobs was an intensely attractive creature, who – dressed only in her revealing silk pyjamas – looked quite at her best tonight. Beautifully smooth skin, flowing golden hair, a full cleavage - you would have expected this fine lady to be heading for a forbidden tryst with some handsome suitor, but in reality she was tip-toeing up to a spectre who had haunted her workplace today.

He had his eyes closed. His breaths were shallow and his ribs almost creaked with the effort. With every step Eustacia took towards him she could see another bruise, another disfigurement, another weeping wound. Yet she kept on, closer and closer, holding her breath.

Suddenly his eyes flashed open: two graveyards staring straight at her. Eustacia gasped aloud, terrified. She had no real reason to worry for her safety, for Sallows was essentially a caged and dying animal.

It was he who spoke first.

“Fine evening, isn't it?” he croaked.

Eustacia didn't know how to reply, so she just said, “Hello.” Then – without thinking – she said to him, “Welcome to the museum.”

She didn't know he could manage it, but this made Sallows laugh. “You haven't got me stuffed yet,” he said. And there it was: the smile.

There followed a silence, not awkward but shared. It was a time for Eustacia to regain her breath and for Sallows simply to wake up. Eustacia thought at the end of it: I could still run away.

I could just run.

But instead she said, “My name is-”

“Your name is Eustacia Jacobs. I've read your file,” he said, making himself laugh this time. “You live over there, at 24 Bright Horizons Point. You work at this museum, and children instantly love you.”

She gushed a thank you and asked him what his name was.

“You know it,” he replied, “because that soldier told you earlier today.”

“I would like to hear you say it.”

“They call me Sallows,” he said between wracking coughs, “So I suppose that's my name.”

“I'm Eustacia Jacobs, I'm 25, I'm a trained nurse, I also work at The Kandikind Ward, my father's called Bruce, my mother's called Kirsty, my-”

“Eustacia, why are you here?” Sallows interrupted.

“I don't know,” she answered nearly truthfully. “Why are *you* here?”

“I like the view.” He paused before going on. “You haven't been properly introduced to a Kitty before, have you Eustacia?”

“No.”

“Let me tell you a little about ourselves. When we're not fiercely attacking each other, and hunting down scraps of food, as we

feral creatures do, we are inclined to ponder our position in this world of ours. We all think that it is not unreasonable to assume there is a little injustice floating about, which you should know about – even if you don't feel it – from your work in the museum.”

“Yes. I have heard something like that.”

“Being at the wrong end of this injustice, a Kitty such as myself has two paths to choose from. The first is to surrender to the allure of your glorious civilisation – your robust economy, your modern morals, your cosy beds. Many try this; they try to “get under the field” as it's called. They travel thousands of miles and risk death by trying to smuggle themselves in. Over there-” Sallows pointed with a bony finger, “a handful of people are being killed as they climb this very barbed wire fence.”

“Oh so they are,” Eustacia Jacobs said casually, “I hadn't noticed that.”

“Don't worry, you're not meant to. The problem with this first path is that it doesn't help anybody else. As an estimate, there are 4 billion of us Kitties. If one of us climbs over a fence and gets under the field, we're leaving the other billions behind.” He stopped himself. “Eustacia, do you know why you came here yet?”

“No, not really. But tell me... earlier, why were you smiling?”

“Funny,” he replied, “I was going to ask you the same thing.” They shared another moment.

“But anyway,” he continued, “the *second* path open to Kitties is traditionally to fight this injustice. This may seem strange to you, since you can't sense there is much to fight. But there are billions of people who need help. Behind that hill there,” he pointed, “lie what's left of my family. My parents died a long time ago, but my sister is there. She doesn't like to admit it, but she is dying from starvation. My brothers are there – they both have aids and one is mentally ill as a bonus. I'm the only one in the family who'll make the sports team,” he said, and laughed. He was good at making himself laugh. “How old do I look, Eustacia?”

“I have no idea,” she replied, thinking of 35 or maybe 40.

“I am 26,” Sallows said, which made Eustacia audibly gasp again. “A long time ago I chose the second path, the path of fighting injustice. It's hard to believe, but I have a reputation as a strong, brave man. Can I tell you a secret?”

“Yes.”

“But you have no reason to keep it, do you?”

“No.”

“Nevertheless. I'm a member of a group of activists called The Liberators of Nature. All we want to do is balance things out better. That's all. So I've stuck to this second path. But there's a saying we Kitties have, do you know what it is?”

“Of course not.”

“*It's only a matter of time.* That's what we say. If we don't die, we give up. Everybody gives up and everybody tries to get under the field. The second path is a dead-end. Anyone would tell you I've been walking down a dead-end all my life. And that's why I came here – I wanted to know more about the first path. I wanted to know what all the fuss was about. And do you know what I think now?”

“No, what?”

Sallows stared at the idyllic land of detached homes and central heating glowing in front of him.

Then all he said – and he said it quietly – was: “It's not too shabby.” He fainted, dragging his arm down the fence and collapsing into an embarrassing heap.

Eustacia didn't quite know what to do. She had liked Sallows' speech, and she had been quite surprised he had taken a fall, but she could hardly say that she cared. She decided that the best thing she could do was to poke him. She proceeded to poke him.

After five or so pokes, Sallows regained consciousness.

He seized Eustacia's hand. She gasped louder than ever now. But instead of recoiling in fear, she moved closer to him. Not because she felt sorry for him, but because she liked his touch.

He stood up, and as she drew herself closer to the fence, so did he. Soon they could feel each other's breath.

“We must be careful!” Eustacia whispered, “If the guards see us-”

“They're taking care of other business,” Sallows reassured her.

A strange feeling overcame Eustacia. It wasn't just the shock and the romance. The thing was, she was at the penumbra of the moral field, right up against its edge, and as she squeezed herself against the fence to hold Sallows' hand the effect of the Blinker withered away. It wasn't protecting her anymore.

“You look hurt,” she found herself saying, not sure of herself, “you need to be wrapped up warm. I'll bring you some food, no, we can get you inside. How can we get you inside? How do you feel? What-”

“It was cruel of me, to hold your hand, Eustacia-”

“No! Cruel of me! To be here, wrapped up in warm silk, not offering you any food or water. How long is it since you last drank?” She took a deep breath. “Sallows, what’s happening to me?”

“You know what’s happening. It was wrong of me to –”

“Come in!” Eustacia cried with unfamiliar anxiety, “Come in here!”

“Eustacia, you’re panicking because you’re feeling new emotions, but have you seen the height of these fences and-”

“Trust me Sallows, I know a way in!” Sallows’ eyes lit up and she continued, “When I was a child we’d bike down to this Blinker, after it had just been put up and wasn’t really being used. We’d dare each other to escape! I would never come anywhere near this close because I was a scaredy-cat, but Susan Woods was so tough she was braver than all the boys, and-and she’d dig up all the mud with her fingernails and the fence goes down for metres for most of the way along, but at one place it doesn’t – here!” In one great thrust Eustacia heaved up a small section of the fence, which would have been impossible to do from outside, but was easy enough to do from the inside – nobody had seriously considered people trying to break *out*. She had to strain with all her might to keep the fence from springing back into place.

“And nobody ever went through it, even Susan, but she used a metal chain to tie it to a tree – this tree!” Eustacia was now frantically trying to relive her memories of Susan Woods, looking for something that would keep the fence tied to a branch of the tree. “My dress! I’ll use my dress!” She ripped off a shred of luxury Kashmir pyjama from her thigh, and formed a barely effective impromptu knot between the fence and the tree.

After a gasp, she let go.

The silk held. It was only a slither of finery, yet it kept open a breach in the greatest instrument of social control known to man.

The pair kept dead quiet as Eustacia regained her breath. If the border guards caught sight of them now they would do more than frown. These guards would kill a Kitty without flinching.

“Sallows, you are saved,” Eustacia said, welcoming him in. It was all over in her mind.

But not in his.

“Don’t do this to me, Eustacia.”

“What do you mean? I’m not doing anything to you, I’m helping you.”

Sallows was sorely tempted by the opening in the Blinker. He craved nourishment, shelter, protection, warmth – all the things he could easily find if he just took that step. But he couldn’t.

“They say it’s only a matter of time, that everyone gives up, but not me. I’m afraid of what I’d become.” He sighed wistfully. “Would it be that easy?”

“Yes. It’s just one step. I can look after you.”

Sallows looked around himself and briefly considered his whole life. It had been hard and it had been horrible, but he had never given up.

“I can’t, Eustacia.”

“I want to feel like you,” Eustacia said. “I’m coming out.”

“No.”

“I want to-” She stepped forward.

“No, Eustacia. It’s suicide!”

“I need to know. If I step out of here, can you promise something? Promise me you will keep hold of my hand?”

Sallows gave up; he knew it was no use.

“Yes. I promise you that. But don’t you dare come out here if you can’t go back in.”

“I’ll make sure,” she said. As long as the silk held, she could return. She stood trembling on the threshold.

“Even Susan Woods never went through,” she said. Then, tentatively, and squeezing Sallows’ hand as if tight-roping over the Grand Canyon, she took that step out of the Blinker.

It was as if Eustacia’s ears popped. It was a punch in the chest. A punch in the guts. The horror of everything she already knew crept over her: the death tolls she jovially discussed with her father, the lessons she taught every day at the museum, and the scene that had waited patiently outside her window for years.

Everything in the distance was in pitch darkness, but her eyes had been opened and she knew what the darkness held. She could see the thousands of refugees, the pained looks on each of their faces, and the years of their suffering. And she could see Sallows, whose hand she brought to her neck – the man she had left shivering against a cold metal fence as she had calmly explained to school children that his kind were soon to be extinct.

More than ever now, she could see his strength, and his beauty.

“Thank you,” she said, and she kissed him.

Sallows could only kiss weakly, through withered lips. But he was a good kisser. His physical imperfections were the least of the problems disturbing Eustacia.

“And thank you,” Sallows said in turn. They held each other close, scared of what would happen if they were found like that, but treasuring each other’s presence.

“I want to know where you were born,” she said.

“I want to know how you smell so good,” he said.

“And your real name, and your favourite place, and what makes you smile.”

“Eustacia, I’d ask you what it feels like to have parents. I’d ask you how you got that little scratch on your nose. I’d ask you what it feels like to walk on a freshly mown lawn.”

Eustacia suppressed a sad laugh. “We haven’t got time for that, have we?”

“No, Eustacia. We’ll be found out. No time.”

“And there’s so much to do! So many people to help.”

“That’s right.”

Eustacia took one more bold step away from the light.

“We’ll do it together,” she said, and she spoke with utter conviction. “We can help all Kitties by organising them, rallying them under one banner, *our* banner. We can lead them, Sallows, lead them to fight for themselves, for their own lives!” She flung her arms into the air. Never before had she been able to harbour such tremendously compassionate intentions. Never before had her best been so good. “You have freed me, Sallows, and now we must free them all.”

To Eustacia this was the beginning of a new life: a quest for her and her new love.

To Sallows this appeared simultaneously to be the most endearing and heartbreaking display of human courage he had ever seen.

“You are looking the wrong way,” he said calmly and quietly to Eustacia. “I have spent my life trying to help those people, Eustacia.”

In fact, at precisely the time when hope had flooded into Eustacia, the last drop had been wrung out of Sallows’ corpse-like frame. Nothing before had made him realise just how futile all his life striving had been. Perhaps it really was only a matter of time, perhaps everybody did give up.

Something changed in Sallows. Now, he had a plan. It wasn’t a good plan, but it was a plan.

Sallows turned Eustacia’s attention to the fence itself.

“As long as the Blinkers exist there will be Kitties like me.”

“You mean... if we want to make a difference we have to change things on my side?”

“Yes. We need to bring down the Blinkers, from the inside. It’s been the dream of Kitties for –”

“Sallows, why are you called Kitties?” Eustacia interrupted. “Nobody I asked could tell me. Is it just because you’re weak, like kittens?”

“No, it’s not. My sister told me what it means many years ago. She said it’s a name we should be proud of. Let me see, do you know of a settlement called New York?”

“Settlement! Of course.”

“Well in the 20th century something happened there. A man with a knife chased after a lady in the street just by her house as she screamed for help. He got her and he stabbed her, again and again. He was trying to murder her and rape her, and she was trying to stop him. She fought with him for over half an hour and dozens of her neighbours heard her scream. But nobody came to help. Nobody called the police. They closed their windows and put the TV volumes up. Nobody helped her, and she died alone. Her name was Kitty Genovese. Her fellow humans had shut her out. By our standards it isn’t a very notable death, but at the time it was significant.”

“And then, I guess,” Eustacia said, “everybody forgot about Kitty Genovese. We did, didn’t we?”

“Yes. Now everybody assumes we’re called Kitties just because we’re weak. Their weakness became ours.”

“I understand.”

They kissed again, while it felt like both sides of the world were closing in on them. Eustacia thought she heard something along the fence, so she put her finger to Sallows’ lips until everything was absolutely silent. She kept one eye on the tense shred of silk, knowing that if that gave they would be shut out here forever.

“If only we could take the Blinker down from the inside,” Sallows said in a sigh. “You could infiltrate the Blinker defences because you’re trusted, you know a few of the soldiers, and nobody would suspect you. Or, if we’re taking a longer strategy, you could work your way up through the ranks, until you’re so close you can sniff those Blinker controls. Meanwhile, I’ll be co-ordinating resistance on

the inside, lying low and waiting for that moment – that critical point when you pull the plug!” Without realising it he was shouting now, and Eustacia put her hand over his mouth but he tore it off. “Then – on a day which will be written into the world’s encyclopaedias as one of the finest triumphs of humanity – the people of our world will embrace each other again. Not only will the Kitties no longer be Kitties, but the people on the inside – your people – will denounce all they had recently stood for. They’d do that, wouldn’t they?”

“Yes, yes they would, if they knew. But there’s one thing-”

“We would be one people again! United by our nature, respecting each other as fellow human beings. Whenever a society has fallen out of balance, Eustacia, all it takes is a little nudge to topple back! What do you say Eustacia, shall we fight this insanity? Shall we fight together?”

“It’s all I want to do now Sallows. But-”

“We could-”

“*But* it’s impossible. It is entirely impossible. And I know you know why. As soon as we step onto that nicely mown lawn we will be them. We won’t care anymore. Not about your sister or your brothers, or any Kitty. I don’t want to be that person ever again, Sallows.”

“You’re right,” Sallows said, and she saw him weep for the first time. “You’re right, Eustacia. Unless...”

“Unless what? There can’t be anything that-”

“Unless these pills really do work.” With a frail, quivering hand, and tears streaming down his face, Sallows took two shiny pills from a pocket. Eustacia gasped – happily this time.

“Are they-”

“They’re pills an old activist friend gave me. They temporarily suppress the effects of the moral field. What a world, Eustacia, where you have to stay on pills to be sane. If we take these pills-”

“I know what happens! Just before I started working at the museum, they used to give these to people to demonstrate the power of the Blinker! If we can keep ourselves in supply of them-”

“I have many,” Sallows said proudly.

“Then we can go inside without becoming one of them! We can trick them! Sallows, I can’t believe you didn’t tell me sooner!” She hugged him and kissed him urgently. “This is it then,” she said.

“This is it. Their effect is instant.”

Together they swallowed their pills – Sallows with some effort, since he had long since dried up. They had different ways of exhibiting

their ecstasy: Eustacia looked like she’d just found the gate to heaven, while Sallows seemed on the verge of an emotional breakdown.

“Why are you crying?” she asked.

“I’m just happy.”

The pills left an aftertaste of bitter oranges, but they had tasted so sweet.

They were approaching the Blinker’s opening, hand in hand, only two steps away, when suddenly they heard footsteps. Boots – army boots. In unison they looked up and saw a soldier marching straight towards them. They panicked – but they panicked in different directions. Eustacia jumped back into the shadows; Sallows ducked straight through the Blinker.

Yet as he leapt he caught the fence. The tense silk ripped. The fence swung shut. He scurried behind an immaculately trimmed hedge to hide, and then they both held their breaths as the border guard marched past between them.

Eustacia sighed with relief. “OK, now just open it for me,” she whispered across to him. She heard him sniffing as he raised himself up from the lawn.

“I can tell you how to open it, it’s fine!” She giggled nervously. “What does it feel like, to walk on a freshly mown lawn?”

No reply came.

“Sallows? I said, what does it feel like, to walk on a freshly mown lawn?”

Without uttering a word, Sallows walked up to the fence and pushed through two crumbly little pills.

“You’ll need these,” he said, as he took a step back.

“What do you mean?” she asked demanding, “Let me in! I just took one of these pills, what are you-”

“They’re sustenance pills, Eustacia. I won’t need them anymore.”

Eustacia fell to her knees in disbelief. The aftertaste of bitter orange made her choke. She felt humiliated.

“I fooled myself too, Eustacia.”

“You didn’t need to do this, why didn’t you just come in before when I asked you to? I would have let you in!”

“Because then I was like you are now. But it was only a matter of time.”

“No! What are you saying?!” It was now Eustacia’s turn to weep. She rose and flung herself against the metal fence.

“Hold my hand!”

Sallows barely glanced at her before he turned and walked away – hobbling on his weak, disfigured legs.

“Hold my hand, please,” she pleaded. He hobbled on. “Then at least say goodbye! Please!” He hobbled on. The tears on his cheeks were drying. She was on her knees, scratching at the mud by the fence. It was futile. “Say goodbye! Not out of obligation, but out of *love!*” She was screaming now. “Out of *love!*”

Sallows stopped hobbling. Without turning to face her, he simply said, “Remember what you were like, just today.”

Eustacia let out a desolate whimper. Sallows continued:

“I never understood why you came to me.”

Sobbing to herself, she said, “Because you smiled. Because I loved you!”

He was now thinking about water and food. He wasn’t thinking about the final piece of his plan: what he had planned to tell Eustacia, once they were both inside. How he’d overheard her telling the children about the pill. How he had given up, like they all do. And why he had deceived her – because it was, by then, the only way he could get her to return. He had planned to tell her that all he had wanted was for them to be together. In one moment he had planned so much.

But he couldn’t think these things now; he needed water and food.

“Stop screaming *now!*” a soldier barked at Eustacia, pointing his machine gun at her face. Too distraught to be terrified, she stared back at the soldier.

“Dom! Oh thank god it’s you, Dom!” It was Private Dominic Wilson, her friend, her saviour.

“Eustacia Jacobs? I am ordering you to cease causing noise pollution for our residents.”

“What do you mean *our residents?* I *am* a resident!” she cried back. He responded by harshly wrapping her knuckles with the butt of his gun. She recoiled in pain.

“You can’t feel for me anymore, can you?” She asked. Private Dominic Wilson didn’t respond. He had absolutely no reason to.

The man known simply as Sallows hobbled his way to Eustacia’s family house. Mr. Jacobs invited him in swiftly and cared for

him – food, water, warmth, kind words. Mrs. Jacobs tended to his wounds. They were compassionate people.

It was a happy time for Sallows, and he found it easy to amuse Mr. Jacobs. He would say things like: “They are all dying – my people, my sister and my two brothers... and I’m eating Camembert!” And Mr. Jacobs would guffaw.

He told Mr. Jacobs about Eustacia, and all he could do was shrug and say,

“She’ll find a lot to do out there. She likes to keep busy.”

He really had fallen in love with Eustacia Jacobs and he really had fooled himself. To a part of him that moment at the fence had been a moral retirement – for he had done his part. To another part of him it had been a suicide.

Yet his was a happy ending.

Eustacia Jacobs walked on in search of strangers. She had lost everything and was fumbling her way through darkness.

Yet she remembered that moment when her ears had popped. In the arms of Sallows, when reality unveiled itself. That had felt like freedom.

Eustacia Jacobs had been grateful for many things in life, but above all else her freedoms.

What her father said was true – she would find a lot to do, she would keep herself busy. She whispered sweetly to a lost love, “I will not give up. I will not.”

So it went that hers too was a happy ending.

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