

06:01

As the sky grew lighter they were more obvious. The numbers over the past hours had increased exponentially. In the grey light before dawn they appeared like ants moving ever closer up the slope towards the prison. Casey coughed sadly. That was her thing, she had learnt a lot about herself over the past two months alone in the prison cell, and she had learnt that when she was nervous she would make a strange dry cough sound with her throat. Even being aware of this mannerism didn't stop her; in fact she sometimes felt it reminded her of its inevitability.

She could hear the familiar noise of a metallic shoe buckle scraping across the stone floor, she would never get used to that sound; it made the hairs on her arms rise on a crest of revulsion. Casey slumped onto the floor and hid behind the upturned bed frame waiting. She had learnt to be careful over the past two days, they were getting ever more desperate for food and her mother could only protect her so much. She peered through the gap in the wadding. It was her mother; she could hear her pulling the locks on the door. This was it, they were coming for her. The locks would give her more time but the end that had always been inevitable was now imminent.

Before her mother had been taken she had explained that it would take them at least an hour to climb up the embankment, so from the moment they crossed the fence she had an hour to prepare. Casey stood up and moved towards the bars. Her mother slumped onto the floor close to her. Blood had congealed over the hole in her face, and her dress was covered in bodily fluids and ingrained with dirt. Casey smiled; her mother would have been disgusted at the colour of it. She had refused to change into more practical clothes even after the last news broadcast. She had changed into sensible shoes but she had retained her favourite dress, in fact she had chosen her favourite earrings and bracelet to accompany it. Casey had watched her mother in the mirror as she preened herself.

"It's only death dear, it's not relevant. It's how you live that counts."

Casey reached out instinctively to touch her mother's arm. The speed of her response to fresh meat was frightening. Casey barely managed to retract her arm in time, a second later and her mother would have sunk her broken teeth into it. She knew she had a scratch, she could feel the blood trickle down her arm. The smell of fresh blood would make her mother worse. Casey sat up and watched her mother push her arms through the bars, her hands grasping wildly like excited clams, in her general direction. In the later stages vision becomes distorted and most body movements became jerky and spasmodic.

How had she done this? How had she kept her daughter safe in a prison cell with en suite facilities and a stack of tinned food? Only her mother would have a plan, be able to execute it and even when dead have enough love for her daughter to protect her, despite all her conflicting primal instincts. Her mother slumped again letting her lifeless arms drop; she used her index finger to point to the cupboard.

Casey brushed her freshly washed hair out of her eyes. She had showered and changed clothes just had her mother had done when the announcement was made. Casey pulled her legs to her chest and squeezed them close. Her mother pounded her fist on the bars, blood and tissue sprayed into the cell. Casey wanted to be brave, but she couldn't stop the tears. She couldn't bear watching her mother disintegrate before her eyes, this was too much. She stood up and opened the cupboard. She reached up and brought down the gun and the tin of peaches. She slowly pulled back the ring and stared at the fruit spooning next to each other. She missed human contact; she had listened to the radio waiting for someone to find a cure, to come to her aid, to save the day, to send

in bombs, anything. Anything to stop the endless and now apparently pointless, waiting. No matter how despairing the voices she had liked to hear words, harsh guttural shouts of anger, strident tones of anguish and soft gentle prayers, all of them reminded her she was human. Now there was just her. She reached in and fished out a peach slice, it slipped onto her dress. She glanced furtively at her mother; before the plague she would have received a reproving glance, now her mother just bled onto the floor staring into space. She lifted the slice into her mouth and savoured the sweet sticky flavour. She could hear the first of them on the roof; one slipped and seemed to take others with them. Casey stared at the key in the lock. She held her can and stood to check the lock and then take the key. The gun slammed into the floor. She stopped and held her breath. They would have heard that, would they know there was someone alive in here? She slumped back down.

What if by some miracle they didn't find her? The hoard would move on, but there were always some left behind, so when she ran out of food and she was forced to leave the safety of the cell, they would be waiting. She sobbed into the peaches. She had promised herself a treat before the end, she gathered the peaches and shoved them deep into her mouth, she could barely chew them now, she felt so scared and bewildered. She closed her teeth, once, twice then she forced herself to swallow them, this was her treat and she would have it. She stared into the empty tin. She took a long drink of the syrupy liquid and then stood and moved to the sink to wash her hands. Then she dried them carefully. She opened the small bottle of gin and gave a silent toast to her mother then she guzzled it down. Her first and last alcoholic drink. The alcohol rushed into her brain. The love for her mother moved swiftly to anger.

"I hate you!"

She screamed her lungs ready to explode with the force. Her voice seemed strange to her now, after four days of no human sounds it seemed wild and extreme and it shocked her. Her mother turned her deformed face towards her.

"Why did you leave me? Why couldn't you kill me?"

Casey hated her childish behaviour, but it was fair she was a child. She would be fourteen next birthday. She almost choked with the irony, she would never see fourteen. She would die thirteen.

The first day they had arrived at the prison they had found the place busy with people packing. It was on the only place with a view of the surrounding flat lands. Behind the hill was a severe escarpment very difficult to traverse, they had destroyed the bridge so there was only one way to attack. The front access was up a steep grassy bank which had deterred them so far, even the people coming there for guidance and food distribution had struggled. Her mother had tried to convince the police to stay, but they had refused. All but the three of them left. They watched the food van from the window, they simply threw themselves at the van until the sheer numbers of bodies impeded their progress. The family had watched helpless as they were dragged screaming from the back of the van. Casey had known they weren't dead. When the hoard had moved on to find fresh food her mother and father had dispatched the injured and retrieved the food, then they had barricaded themselves in.

They had all hoped that someone, the government, the army, anyone would find them. They kept in contact via a short wave transmitter but the voices soon melted away. That's when her mother had discussed the inevitable. She had packed the cell with food had explained how to fire the gun and placed it safe in the cupboard.

"You have to get the brain stem; they don't have higher level functions any more but if the brain stem goes they can't do the basics. You only have one shot, put the gun in your mouth on top of

your tongue or under your chin and tilt your head back slightly as if you're looking to the sky and shoot back, not up. If you don't obliterate your brain you'll be dead but you'll become..." Casey had stared blindly back.

"But if I'm dead what does it matter. If I'm dead then I won't care if my body is still wandering about, I mean it might be fun."

Her mother had hugged her tight. Casey remembered the feel of her mother's fingers laced in her hair.

"Teenagers always have to argue. You're a beautiful young woman with a good brain, use it. Just do what you think is right,"

She had whispered tearfully. Casey stared at the gun in her hand. She slowly moved to standing and turned to the window ensuring her back was covered by the bed frame. She turned to look outside once more. The face stared back at her, eyes blank, viscous fluids dripping; it slid down the window leaving a trail of blood. Casey staggered back and the bed fell clattering to the floor. Her mother raised her head sharply and another face at the window squealed. Casey raised the gun to his face and stopped. The glass was reinforced, she mustn't break it. There was no point in killing him, there were too many, she couldn't give them all peace.

Casey slid down the wall knowing time was growing short. She looked at her watch. 6:52. She stared lovingly at her mother. She had put her in here to protect her to give her a chance, the only chance. Her father had wanted them all to get in but she had known that their job was to protect her, keep them away as long as possible. When her father got bitten they had both been so shocked at its suddenness that they had been unable to move. It was only her mother's screams that had jolted Casey to action. He had turned 24 hours later. Her mother had documented the changes and made notes. Initially there had been some recognition and he had been able to sound a few words, but as he decomposed that disappeared. Her mother had never been able to kill him and that's how he managed to scratch her, even though she knew she would turn too she wouldn't kill him. Then one day she lost the ability to have conscious thought.

Casey stared at her. Despite everything she felt there was something there, some recognition of her daughter. She had kept her father away from her and now she had locked the door. Her mother sat waiting with her, reminding her of what needed to be done, waiting for the end.

Casey took off the safety catch.

"I love you mum."

Her mother made no acknowledgement. Casey rested the nozzle of the gun on the bars and squeezed the trigger gently. The impact pushed her back as she watched her mother's brains scatter across the wall. She may not be able to give everyone peace but she could help her mother. The noise would bring them now, she had to act quickly. She sat on the mattress, her legs wide giving her a strong position. She could hear them in the outer rooms now, her eyes flicked to the clock.

6:58. She was scared by the volume of the noise but she focused on the clock. She depressed the trigger slightly.

6:59. She would wait it would give her time to say a prayer.

7:00. Casey released the trigger.