

BATTERIES

Today is the first day that I can form thoughts. Before, there were only colours and sounds and feelings in my head. Now I can put words to them. It's warm where I stand, under the light. Everywhere else fades into muted darkness, past the spherical glow from above. Somebody called it the sun. I am small, but so is everybody else.

I can hear them coming.

The door opens and a strange coloured light explodes through the crack. I squint against it, like everyone else.

"What are they?" I ask someone beside me.

"I don't know," she responds. "But they aren't like us."

I feel the vibrations from their footfalls through the ground. There are two of them today. Yesterday they were the same, but different ones. They speak a strange guttural language that I can't understand. It is too complex, too fast for my ears.

"Do you think they'll give us food again today?" the same girl I questioned asks me.

"I hope so," I reply.

"What is your name?"

"I don't know. I don't remember being given one," I say.

"Me either, so I made one up for myself."

"What is it?" I ask.

"Rose."

"That's a pretty name," I say, smiling at her.

"What will your name be?"

I stare at the strangers, the giants that are roaming around us. They have done nothing to scare me, but I remain wary. The other ones hurt us. But that was before I had thoughts. Now, when I remember, I know that I was screaming. They cut us and sorted us—harsh; cruel; laughing—and there was so much fear. These ones have fed us, given us water and the sun. I don't want to be owned, but these strangers have control over us.

“Macy,” I say after a pause.

“Macy suits you.”

“Thank you.” I like that she gave me time to think. It was a difficult thing, to find a name for myself when I am so new to this world. I suppose it was just the combination of sounds in my head that resonated with me. “Where do you suppose we are?”

“I don't know,” Rose says. “It's quite big though, don't you think?”

I look around. It is hard to tell where the world ends, with the muted darkness enclosing us from all angles, but yes, I nod, it does seem big. We aren't the only ones talking. I can hear many other voices, echoing through the world. If I look up, I can see the reflection of other suns. I assume there are more of us scattered around, but there are barriers in between, so I can only imagine.

“Here they come,” I say, moving closer to Rose.

We watch as the giants step over the barrier, the one that is so much higher than us, but so much smaller than them. They are strange creatures, enormous and blue all over, with many arms that stretch forth and deposit food into the middle of our encasement. There are thirty of us—I quickly count—and we huddle close to one another, cautious of these blue giants. They leave. The bravest of us race forward to the food. Rose and I hesitate, but after a quick glance at each other, realise we should follow suit. We each grab a large handful of food—biscuit-like things—and retreat to the edge of the spherical glow from the sun. We sit and eat in silence.

“What do you suppose happens to us?” Rose asks as she finishes her last biscuit.

“We can't stay here forever, can we?” I feel that giving a question for an answer is inadequate. But I cannot think of anything more solid to give.

“We have to have a purpose,” Rose says.

“Why?”

“There was too much pain for us to be without purpose.”

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The next eight weeks follow the same pattern, and I think, on many occasions, that Rose might be wrong about us having to be meaningful in some way to the blue giants. Until today.

“I’m scared, Macy,” Rose whispers.

“Me too,” I reply, putting my arm around her. We have grown, all of us quite equally. But the blue giants will always be larger. I can hear yelling from other suns, cries of pain and terror. I know we will be next. “Stay close to me, so we don’t get separated.”

“Okay.”

The blue giants, with their many arms, step over the barrier, which is still so much higher than us. They grab us by our ankles, their odd hands grasping, quick and relentless.

“Rose!” I scream, as I am pulled into the air. I look around. I have never been this high before. I was right—there are many suns—and we are the last to remain. The blue giant grabs Rose in another hand, attached to his tentacle-like cluster of arms, and deposits both of us into the same crate. I stand and call out her name again, but it is muffled, there are so many of us pressed together. Calling, calling, calling.

“Macy,” I hear. I see Rose’s auburn hair, a darker hue than anyone else’s, on the ground. She is being trampled.

I push past the others, squeezing through bodies to help my friend.

“Help me,” I order two others.

They do. Together we extract Rose from the limbs holding her down. She is injured, her legs and body bleeding.

“You’ll be okay, I’ll protect you,” I reassure, looking around. We have not yet experienced a murder. But we have heard them from other suns. The screams. The dying.

The unknown, the purposeless existence, the blue giants, the fear. It elicits different reactions from individuals. And in some, it elicits violence, hatred and despair. Weakness is not a favourable characteristic. Rose and I know that.

“I know you will,” Rose replies. “Thank you,” she says to me and the other two girls who helped.

“We will help protect you as well,” one of the girls says. The other nods.

“What are your names?” I ask. They look puzzled. “I’m Macy, and this is Rose,” I introduce. We have interacted before, but in the beginning most of us banded off in groups of two or three. The future unbeknown to us, we seemed to form small groups. Less of us to become attached to, in case something happened.

“You can choose them for yourselves,” Rose says, her voice is kind.

“I’ll be Sarah,” the one who spoke says.

“Emily,” the one who nodded says, after a pause.

We all tense, as the crate we are in is lifted into the air. There are holes in the crate and we can see through them, see that we are being taken to the door by the blue giants. The door opens and we all squint against the strange coloured light, lifting our hands to shade our eyes. Despite our fear, we all look around, hungrily. The world is more than we thought. The world is beautiful. The air smells clean and it feels fresh and cool in my lungs. I want to escape this crate and explore the colours before me. But all too soon we are placed inside something else.

Inside a crate, inside a machine. The blue giants finish packing all of the crates into the machine. The holes on our crate almost line up exactly with the holes on the crate next to us. They are touching. Someone from the hole opposite mine reaches out. I press my palm to hers.

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For twelve weeks we are kept in a large hall. We now know that our first world was not really the world, but a tiny fragment, with tiny suns. Our new hall is larger and our food has changed. Instead of biscuits, we are given a variety of vegetables and grains and other substances that I do not know the name of, but taste salty and strange on my tongue. I eat them though, my body tells me that I need to.

Rose has recovered. Sarah and Emily are our friends now, too. We keep to ourselves. We don't go near the gang. Violence attracts violence so it seems. Sickness is looked upon as weakness and in the morning you will be dead. So I eat the salty strange things and keep myself active, wanting to be healthy and avoid the gang. I make sure Rose, Sarah and Emily do as well.

We have grown even more now. Rose is beautiful, as her name suggested from the start. She has the darkest hair of all of us and the prettiest face. Sarah is the largest, Emily the smallest. I am in the middle, with long limbs and fair hair. The blue giants are more numerous here, in this large hall where we all reside as one. They take away the dead in the mornings.

"What is our *purpose*?" Rose keeps asking, wondering, needing to know. "What is it, Macy?"

"I wish I knew," I say, patting her on the arm.

"The light has been changing," Sarah says. "Each day we have more and more."

"It makes it hard to sleep," Emily notes. "But I can feel my body changing along with the light."

"So can I," I reply.

The next day the blue giants return, with their many outstretched arms reaching for our ankles again. Rose and I huddle together, as we did all those weeks ago under our sun. We know that there is no use in struggling. It just makes it hurt more.

"I hate this," Rose murmurs, a tremor in her voice.

I take her hand. "We all do." We are all terrified.

"Argh!" Sarah screams as she is taken from us.

“Sarah!” Emily calls, before being snatched away by another hand.

Rose is taken next. She doesn’t scream. Her mouth is wide open though.

“I will find you,” I tell her. Her eyes do not leave mine, but her body does.

I feel the secure hold on my ankle, one second before I am flung into the air. This blue giant is not gentle. The blue giant squashes me into a crate, but I am the only one in there.

“Rose?” I call. “Sarah? Emily?”

Another girl is thrown into my crate. She cries. Then another. Then another. Until my crate is full. We are taken away from the large hall. Down a narrow strip, turning corners. I can hear talking. It’s coming from wherever we are headed. It continues to get louder the further the blue giants take us. Then, we are taken through a door and the noise is a cacophony.

The lid to our box is opened. The blue giants grab so many of us at once with their many arms and thrust us into a cage. My head hits a bar and I am dazed. What is happening? Everyone from my crate is forced into this small cage. I grab hold of the bars to hold myself up. There isn’t much room. I am pressed next to two girls I do not know. They look frightened. I feel frightened.

I look opposite me, below and above, adjacent and everywhere there are cages. Cages filled with us.

“What is happening?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” replies one of the girls beside me. She is rubbing her head. I think she must have hit it on the bars like me.

“Are you okay?” I ask her.

“Not really.”

I don’t know what else to say. So I look around for Rose. Or Sarah or Emily. Someone that I know. They are not in my cage.

“Rose!” I call out. My voice is drowned in the dissonance within the room. But I hear a reply.

“Macy, I’m here!” I turn to my right, and see her through the bars.

I stumble forwards, still disoriented from hitting my head. “How are you?”

“Scared.” She reaches through the bars. I hold her hand. Her eyes widen as she looks past me. “Oh no.”

I turn and see the blue giants returning, holding long black tubes in their hands. It is only then that I notice the others, the ones who were here before us, all around. They are the same as us, but they look different. They look tired, lifeless. And they have black tubes protruding from their stomachs. The tubes feed down through the bars and connect to a larger black tube, which runs parallel to the cages. I stick my head out of the bars, as far as I can and crane around to see where the tubes go. When the row of cages stops, the tube turns at a right angle and continues up into the ceiling, high above. I see so many black tubes.

Rose and I and everyone watch as the blue giants and their strange hands open one of the cages. They each grab a few of us and attach the tubes to our stomachs, where we were cut all those weeks ago, before I could form thoughts. Pain. Red. Laughing. The memories are repellent. I do not like this place.

The blue giants are now at my cage. I feel sick. They grab me. Rose calls my name but it is futile. She will be next. The tube is clipped onto a small silver disc that was embedded in my skin after I was cut. It hurts. I scream. So did everyone else. The blue giants move quickly, their arms catching us in multiples of three, so that the nine of us in my cage are attached in an unceremonious manner. The blue giants then fasten the other end of the tubes to the larger one running parallel to our cage.

I sit. Eyes closed. Trying to block out the screaming. I have nowhere to go. The tube has little slack, and it is heavy, pulling painfully on my stomach even when I am motionless.

“Do you know where Sarah or Emily are?” I ask Rose after an interminable amount of time.

“Yes. They’re across from us, in the same cage.” She points and my eyes follow.

I raise a hand in acknowledgement. They do the same. There is nothing to say.

I need to go to the toilet, but I don’t know how. There is nowhere to go and there are girls underneath me. Someone from above has already gone. It fell through the bars, landing

on someone in my cage. No one complained though. What else was there to do, but go where we stood? I hold on until I can't anymore. I am used to going in front of others, I have never known any form of privacy. I shout a warning before I let go, it is the least I can do. My warning is heeded, but there is little room to manoeuvre and the tubes make movement difficult. I feel mortified as my excrement falls through the bars. I cry.

The next morning I awake to a horrendous pain in my stomach. The tube is a vacuum. It is *sucking* something from within me. My stomach twists and turns in response, but it is only a nauseous feeling, the pain is coming from somewhere further down. A majority of us, but not everyone, is going through the same thing. I can hear it. I can see it. Above everyone else I can hear Rose's groans. Not because she is louder than the others, but because I am attuned to her. I don't know if feeling my pain or hearing hers is worse. It doesn't matter, though, I get to experience both.

"What's happening to you?" a girl from my cage asks. Her voice is frail, but there is a forced kindness, for us in pain.

"I—don't—know," I manage to say, my voice breathless.

After a while the pain recedes. It might have been ten minutes. It might have been an hour. I spend the rest of the morning resting. Until the minority, who had been left out earlier, begin to writhe and moan as their tubes begin to suck.

"I guess we know our purpose," Rose says to me through the bars.

"This can't be it," I rebut. "What are we to them, anyway?"

"I suppose they're taking something from us, maybe we're like a power source?"

"A power source?" I repeat. I sound angry.

"Feeding us, waiting for us to grow big enough to move us to the large hall. Then feeding us again and changing the light so that our bodies started to feel different. Then moving us here and attaching us to the tubes," Rose says, her words are fast. "The light changed us, made our bodies produce something, I'm sure of it. That's what they're harvesting from us now. I don't know what it is. I don't know what for. But I feel like we're a power source, hooked up to these tubes."

I look around again, at all of us. "We're batteries, aren't we?"

“I think so.”

“I liked it better when I didn’t know what our purpose was,” I say.

“Me too.”

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Emily died today.

It has been six months since we were first attached to the tubes.

I envy her.

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“What’s happening?” Rose asks me.

Something is different today. The blue giants are unclipping some of the girls from the tubes. I do not know them, though. They throw them into a crate. There is no fight, they are too weak. The blue giants continue around the room, unclipping certain cages and leaving others. They leave my cage, Rose’s and Sarah’s too. They only take the ones who were here before us.

“They’re taking them away,” I say, pointing as some of the blue giants begin to leave, the crates piled up in their many arms.

“I want to be taken away,” Rose says.

“What if it’s somewhere worse?” I ask.

“I don’t think that place exists.”

*

Today it has been a year and a half since we were first brought to this room. Each day we have been fed the exact same thing. Vegetables and grain. Salty strange things, like in the large hall. But they always taste stale, dry. We have water, but it is dirty. I am always covered in excrement. So is everyone else. Every morning our tubes turn into vacuums and suck things from our bodies. Every few days one of us dies.

Rose and I always talk to each other through the bars. I wish I could see her entire body without metal criss-crosses. She is still beautiful, though.

The blue giants walk through the door. We can all sense that something is different. It is the same as a year ago, when they came in and took some of us away. I put my hand through the bars and Rose takes it. I squeeze. We know it will be us today.

The blue giants walk by and unclip us from our tubes. It is such an overwhelming feeling! The heaviness, the torment, the restraint is gone. I let out a laugh. Rose smiles at me. We are taken from our cages and placed in a crate—together. We hug. I look at her, no metal between us. Our bodies are frail but this freedom has granted us a temporary power. Everyone else who is in our crate is smiling. There is no room to walk but I feel like I am floating, I feel weightless.

Our crate is lifted and taken out of the room whose walls we have memorised over the last eighteen months. We are placed in a machine—the same one which brought us from the world with the suns to the large hall. There is light! Beautiful colours all around. I remember this place, this ephemeral world that I wanted to explore. But quickly we are tucked away inside the machine. It takes us on a journey to another place. We are familiar with this feeling. The not knowing feeling. But we are out of our cages, so we are happy. A forgotten emotion.

The machine stops and our crates are removed by the blue giants. There is another room. I can see it ahead. My heart starts beating faster. The colours seem far more important now. I know that within seconds I will not see them again for a long time. Rose and I look out of the holes in the crate. We breathe in the crisp air that smells so sweet. The door opens and we are taken inside.

This place has a bad energy. It smells wrong. Our crates are placed on the floor and the blue giants leave. There are new giants, but they aren't blue. They are white. They also have many arms. They take us from our crates, by our ankles, as usual. But they do not place us in a cage or a hall or a room with suns. They clip us, by our ankles, to a strange conveyor belt. We hang upside down, our arms and hair dangling, reaching toward the earth.

“Macy!” Rose screams, amidst others. “I’m so scared!”

“What is going on?” I yell back. Another question answered with a question. I have nothing more to give. I know this is not a good room.

There are so many names being screamed. So many friends separated. Rose is ahead of me. There are five others between us. The conveyor belt starts to move. We are all rocked forward and begin a swinging momentum, back and forth. Ahead, there is a large pool. I watch as a group of five of us reach the pool. The conveyor belt stops. They hang over the water. Screaming. They are lowered, thrashing. They emerge, still.

I quickly count. There are five batches before Rose will be dunked. Six before me.

“Rose!” I yell. “Rose, look at me!” She turns, facing me, away from the pool. The next five are lowered. “Rose you did have a purpose. And it wasn't to be attached to that tube.” The next five go down and then come back up. There are only three more. “Your purpose was to be my friend! You made my existence worthwhile. You made me laugh. You made me smile. You held my hand when I was scared. You let me choose my name!” Only two more now. “Your purpose was fulfilled, Rose.” One more. “You are my best friend.”

“And you're mine, Macy.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I shut my eyes. I remember the colours. My life was short. It was painful. It should have been filled with those colours that I was only able to witness in snippets of travel between worse place to worse place. The water is below me, I can smell it. I feel myself being lowered. The last thing I remember is thinking of the most beautiful colour of all.

Rose's hair, a darker hue of auburn than any of us.

Battery hens deserve better lives.

I chose to use black tubes as a means to humanise the experience, and also as a red herring. I wanted you to question if the story was about chickens or humans, and this wouldn't have been possible if I described the characters laying eggs each day. I have visited poultry farms for university, cage, barn and free-range systems, and I have also visited a poultry abattoir. I have also had the pleasure of owning six chickens, some of which were rescued from cage systems. I watched them marvel at the feel of grass under their feet for the first time, laughed as they dug into grapes, strawberries and meal worms, discovering there was more to food than pellets. I've seen them nest in my garden, perch in my trees, scratch, jump, flap their wings and come when I called them, for they associated my voice with food, happiness and kindness.

I cannot tell you if chickens—or any animals for that matter—feel emotions like we do, and be scientifically correct. But I can tell you what I believe. I believe that all animals feel pain, fear, happiness and love. And I believe that they all deserve to be treated with respect and have the best lives possible. Please buy free range eggs. Do not support the battery hen or barn industry. I know they are more expensive, but I know that an animal's quality of life is worth two extra dollars per dozen eggs. If you are able to, please buy free-range for all animal products. I know the price is a deterrent for many, and I do not expect or endorse buying organic, which is an even higher price, but when you can, please remember this story and support the free-range industry for all animal products.