

Short Story Contest

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PROMPT: You live in a busy city, where the sound of traffic is constant. One morning you wake up to complete silence . . .

Til Death Do Us Part

by **Kat White**

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Short Story Contest Submission

Prompt 2

Til Death Do Us Part

The city was completely silent, as if it had become consumed by a spontaneous void, and Ana felt herself bristling as a strange gravity seemed to turn the air upside down. Eva's small hand tightened on her own.

Usually, the electric thrum and carefully strategized heartbeat of the city, pulsating through its grid-locked streets, was all she could ever hear. The familiar sounds of garbage bins clattering against the scraped curbs was often her natural alarm clock, but, today, she had woken up to Eva's angular knees pressing into her side instead. She had slept in her bed (again), as young kids often do. The time had read 9:31 a.m when she peeled open her eyes, seizing her with an electrical panic: then, the first instance of the outward silence had made it downright paralyzing. She knew the reason as to why the city of Omaha had all but disappeared overnight. That didn't make it any easier, and it wasn't as if she could explain any of it to Eva. Ana found that her voice barely worked when those wide, doe eyes turned to her expectantly. She thought that they would have had more time together. When Eva slid her hand out of her own, she bit the inside of her tongue to stop the plea that she felt clang together behind her gritted teeth: *Stay. Just a little longer.*

"Look! There's no line at McDonald's today!" Eva exclaimed, flattening her hands wide against the glass window of the apartment that peered down at the deserted streets below. At this

time in the winter, her breath fogged up the glass as if she were breathing plumes of smoke. “Do you think the zoo is like that, too? Can we go? Please?”

The soft, demure inflection to her delicate ‘please’ made something around Ana’s heart tighten, biting into the muscle of it like some piece of frost-forged steel. She had to swallow down against the nausea that kept creeping up her throat like a persistent, long-legged spider.

“Would you really like to? Wouldn’t you like to stay inside and sleep, like the rest of the city?” Ana proposed. She didn’t have the heart to tell this girl she had all but adopted as her own that everyone else in the city was likely long dead, called into the great beyond overnight, shifted by some large gravitational force back to an invisible equilibrium. The air turned with that strange, magnetic feeling again, and her heart plummeted into her chest. Eva did not have much time left. She would be the last to go, and that felt especially cruel.

“Fine. McDonald’s is closed, but we can go to the zoo. Only for a little while, though,” Ana relented, fighting to keep her tone steady, though she could tell it had not worked. The strained undertow lying just below the surface of her words caused something in Eva’s eyes to dim.

For her part, though, she said nothing, and the comfortable weight of her small hand shifted into its rightful place, pale and warm. The sunlight that filtered through the open blinds bathed the apartment in a warm glow that felt eons away from the coldness in her chest, lighting even the haphazard clothes and the dirty dishes that crowded the sink in a romantic glow. It was the last time Ava would see it, she knew. She had called it home for ten years. Ten years in her long, long lifespan would not seem like much, and she would have hoped that, by now, every cataclysmic apocalypse that befell every city she lived in would get easier, time after time. It

didn't. They never got any easier: the sudden silences that she could never predict were always deafening, and aching, aching hollow.

Leaving the apartment complex, warm and brown and slightly tilted in the sunlight, old as it was, the clatter of their lone footfalls over the slanted steps were the only sounds to reverberate against the steel skeletons that surrounded them. Ana ached for the jostling of bodies, for the people scurrying across the concrete the same way they did yesterday, the same way they had done throughout their now cut-off lives. Her mouth was dry with the wanting of it. Even the silence of the Metro, with no one to no longer operate those large, propelled steel tubes, settled underneath her skin like a fine lattice of cold frost. The walk to the zoo was silent and hollow, but Eva did not seem to notice.

The familiar skipping jolt in her step made Ana's balance shaky, but the two held steady as they walked, hand in hand, down silent, cold streets. The black tar pavement was riddled with sweeping plastic bags and discarded soda cans rattling against the ground, and the sounds of their movements were amplified to a hair-raising degree in the oppressive silence. The weight of it sank deeper into her chest with every step. Ana couldn't escape it. The zoo's large, silvery dome loomed large across the horizon (something Eva liked to call the 'silver apricot'), and they had just reached the gates when the air seemed to magnetize with an invisible force that Ana found all too familiar. This time, Eva felt it, too, and stopped.

Ana's grip tightened on Eva's hand impossibly tight. This couldn't be it. Not yet. Eva's face turned up towards her own, a half-crescent molded in the memory of pain. "You're holding my hand too tight, Ana."

She didn't relent. Ana felt like the world was beginning to darken, and, hopelessly, wished that it finally would for her. An immortal cursed to live forever after accidentally

escaping death, only to have the cruel, cruel balancing act of something, some god, maybe, come to take cities in her wake for the cost of her life had, until now, been just left of bearable. The crushing weight of the deaths of thousands for her own long lifeline had used to feel foreign and unimaginable to her, but Eva would be the last to go. Ana was certain she was the last one left to be taken. She couldn't lose her. This girl that she had taken in five years ago, bright-eyed and naive, was someone she could not live without. The thousands of lives she had lived until this point felt meaningless under her stare.

"Don't go," Ana choked. She would rather crack and pop the delicate bones in her small hand for the price of making her stay. "Please. Let's stay here for a little while longer."

"I'm not going anywhere," Eva said, trying to twist her hand out of Ana's grip. "Why would you say that? Can you let go of me, please?"

Ana only loosened her grip, reluctantly. Eva relaxed, her brown pigtails catching the light of the sun in a way that made them seem bound with fire. Ana swallowed against the pinhole in her throat, and it felt like a crushing, painful block of ice was settling in the crook between her ribs. Soaking in every detail of Eva's appearance was difficult: her crooked teeth, one of which she had lost when Ana had tied a loose tooth to a doorknob and swung a little too hard: the scar on the bridge of her nose from when she had fallen off of her bike: the single, amber spot in her right brown eye. Eva peered up at her, perplexed.

"Have we stopped for long enough, now? Can we go inside?"

"S-Sure," Ana managed, clearing her throat against the well of grief threatening to overflow her. "How are you feeling?"

Eva sniffed, pondering, for a moment, as the wind tousled her hair like an adoring parent. The sound it made as it laughed through the empty streets was the sound of air stirring vacant spaces, low and deep. Her eyes became far away.

“Actually...I’m feeling a bit tired.” The yawn that split her face was wide and slow, causing her to stumble. Ana steadied her at her elbow.

“Tired? That can’t be. We just woke up. We’re here to see the animals, remember? The polar bear is your favorite.” She was beginning to cry. The tears felt hot and burning down her cheeks, and she latched onto the pain of it with a startling strength. She would rather feel that than the pain gathering in her chest at the sight of Eva weakening. “Remember?”

“Ana?” Eva asked, small and tremulous. “Who is that coming toward us?”

She felt like throwing up, and felt the hot bile of it collecting at the base of her throat. *No. Not yet.* “Nobody, Eva. There’s nobody there. It’s just me. It’s always me. Focus on me, okay? Look at me.”

Eva’s smile was gaping and slow, done with the same type of languid coolness that reminded her of the way a cat stretches out into a patch of sunshine. “I can’t.”

“You can’t take her,” Ana murmured aloud. “I won’t let you.” She shook Eva, then, hard and fast, choking at the way she ragdolled at her insistent pulls. “Eva. Stop.”

The last word, that simple, whole word--*Stop*--felt like it bounced around forever in that empty, deserted city. Ana thought that was an accurate way to describe the moment when Eva finally slipped out of her grasp.