

WITHOUT

A powerful letter.

BY FRAN WILDE

I filled a glass of water before bed and that's when Tim finally shouted at me.

"Look at the calendar for Pete's sake, how many times do I have to tell you?" he said from the kitchen doorway.

I hadn't been home in eight months. Things were tense before I left. Now they were worse. The lag confused me, made it hard to remember what was restricted. Tim would be fined for my mistake; the seed corn, probably. *Mea culpa*.

I taught history. Resource allocation algorithms weren't my speciality. On the station, rations were calculated for us. Down here, folks tried to make restrictions easy to remember, to keep a kind of independence. A sense of choice. So, each restriction went with the day of the week: Wednesday, therefore water.

Dehydrated from the trip, I forgot. Might have been showing off a little, too.

Tomorrow would be better. Tomorrow was a T. Not too much started with T. Except toilet paper.

No, tomorrow wouldn't be good at all.

When I arrived early Wednesday morning, Tim welcomed me home. His face faltered when he saw I was alone. It broke my heart. I squeezed his hand, tried to make it up to him, to remind him what we once were. In the late afternoon, I woke from a siesta dream of ice in a glass, a bead of moisture clinging to the side, brushing my thumb, clinging. I heard laughter echoing down the halls of the dusty house. It evaporated when I woke, turned to motes of memory.

I couldn't leave until Tim signed the documents I'd brought, and he was stalling. Down here, he could stall me to death, if he wanted. At the very least, if he didn't sign by tomorrow, I'd be stuck until Saturday. No travel on Friday. Friday, therefore fuel. And food.

"Tim, this is awful. Why won't you emigrate?"

"Won't have to, with so many people leaving. Soon we won't need to restrict at all," he said.

He was stubborn, my husband. He had the whole homestead to himself now.

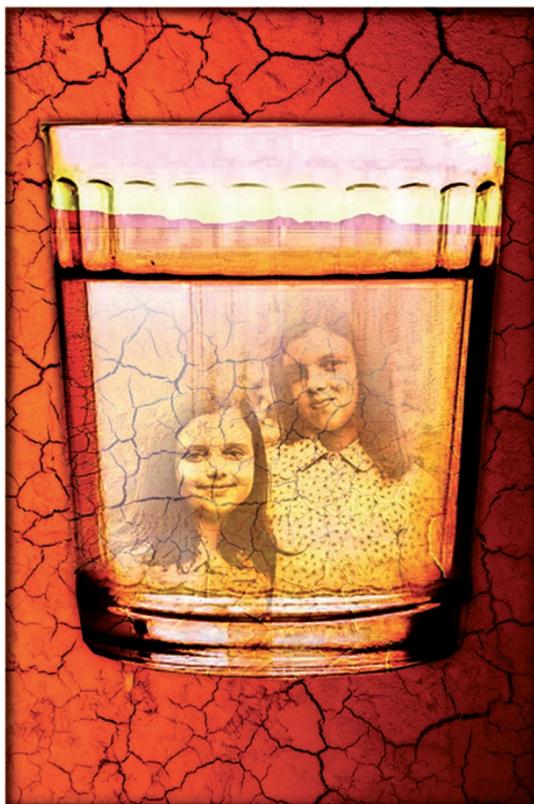
The cousins left first. They said to send word when things got better. Then his brothers went up.

They shut the school and offered me a job on the station. He stayed silent when he realized I was going. Ginned up a court order to

speak for him. I had to sneak the girls out.

We watched from above while he held the fort, protected our heritage.

First thing when I landed, I showed him the photos of Joie and Darra. Thriving, I said. No dust to make them cough.



But the station made it clear I couldn't keep them in my quarters without his signature, thanks to the court order. Couldn't enrol them in school, couldn't get them on the ration algorithm. I'd gone spare on my meals so they'd been eating fine. But I needed Tim to make it legal, or come up and be their father again.

I told him we had room for him. He set his face like a brick and turned to look at the land that ran right to the edge of the sea. It was brittle and dry. The wind blew hot. Last time he saw his daughters, their laughter rasped, mottled with dust and smoke.

"If I leave, it's gone forever. Without the land, there's nothing to come back to."

"What's to come back for?" I'd run my fingers through the scorched soil. It feathered like dust. "Won't be long

before the cliff crumbles and the rest washes away."

"What if it doesn't?" He and the rest of the holdouts thought they could fix it.

"Sign the documents, Tim. Or come with me and do it yourself."

He didn't answer. He picked up the glass of water and looked at it in the light. I hadn't taken a sip. The area's cisterns must have run low. The water that came up through the homestead's pipes had dark tendrils of algae floating in it. First green thing I'd seen here, but not appealing.

He ran his thumb across the rim of the goblet, the etching. The glass was an old one. Mother called it 'depression glass' when she passed it down to me. I hadn't thought about how much of the past it contained when I held it under the tap. The light from the oil lamp reflected off the thick glass. The glitter ran its pattern across Tim's cheekbones, his jawline.

"It's important that someone stays," he said.

Life on the station wasn't perfect, but we had water every day. Days were just days. Green things grew. Filtered air flowed. There was a school. If he dropped the court order, I could sign the kids up for classes. Get them ready for the future.

"It's their lives, Tim."

"They won't remember living here."

"I'll make sure they will." I pulled out the documents again. The photos, too.

"Their future is here."

"Maybe someday. Until then, it's up there."

Other station residents were making the same plea across the scorched county. Mothers, fathers, children, grandchildren. One last try. Gravity tugged at our feet like it didn't want to let us go. The heat was beyond what we remembered.

"You come too," I said.

He shook his head. "I'll make do here." He signed without another word, then carried the glass out to the field and poured it over the dry earth. He didn't come back to the house.

I was free to go. He'd do without. Wednesday, therefore wife. ■

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