

SIMPLE THINGS

A question of survival.

BY REBECCA BIRCH

Ben Nabors curled his bare toes against the rough stone face and grasped the top of the cliff. Once, this climb would have torn shreds from his skin, but that was long ago — when his Earth-issue boots finally wore through and before he built up the calluses that protected him now.

The satchel, stitched from old shirts, shifted against his spine. “Almost there, Cal.”

Ben levered himself over the edge and paused to catch his breath.

Old Lookout stood at the far end of the precipice, its twisted trunk and stunted limbs clinging to the rock, stubborn and defiant. Cal had taken the tree as a mascot. *You see Old Lookout, Ben? Ain't nothing going to move it or call it a blamed fool. That's like you and me. The folks back home ain't forgotten us. They just gotta work out some kinks, that's all. And us? We'll be waiting, just like Old Lookout, and I'll get home to my Abigail.*

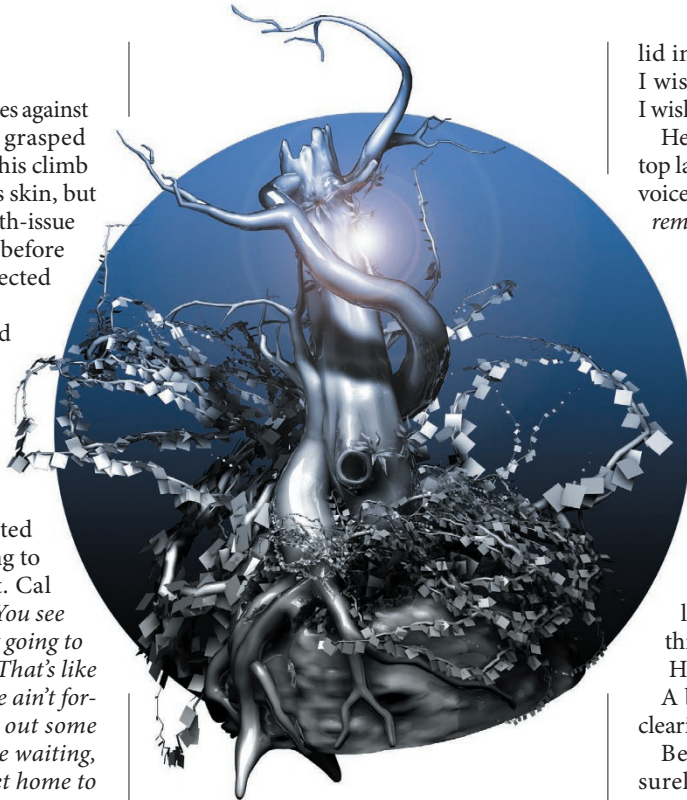
Ben hadn't had the heart to tell Cal he'd given up long ago. After the last of the projected emergency portal dates had passed with no sign of contact — after Mindy, with her dirt-painted hands and soft blue eyes, had succumbed to the summer fever — Ben knew they weren't going home. Not tomorrow. Not the next day. Not ever.

The cookpot filled with Cal's ashes dragged at Ben, as if, instead of his friend's remains, it held some tiny singularity, pulling the world into its gravitational well. Ben's throat clogged and he blinked away tears. They wouldn't do any good. Besides, he'd given up on caring after Mindy died. It was easier that way. Eat, drink, sleep. Try not to get killed. Simple things.

At least, that's what he told himself.

Cal might've been an irritatingly optimistic bugger, but he was smart. *You ain't fooling me with your 'I don't care 'bout nothing'. Coulda taken off to try to find some better place, but you're still here. You're just as much Old Lookout as me.*

Ben cleared his throat and focused on his feet. One step after another until he reached Old Lookout's base. He touched the trunk with one hand and edged towards the precipice. The bark against his palm felt warm. Alive.



Taking a cautious step back, Ben took off the satchel and pulled out the cookpot. His warped reflection stared back at him, all unkempt hair and beard, with eyes so blank they might've already been dead.

When Cal died, Ben knew exactly where he'd spread the ashes, though he'd only climbed the precipice once before. A wild, terrifying rush, his fingers clinging in small clefts, booted feet scrabbling over barely glimpsed protrusions. An escape from the others, when the second planned portal event had passed with no sign of any attempt from Earth. A challenge, to prove he was still worth something. An opportunity to die without shame, if he should fall.

But he hadn't fallen. Cal had seen him from far below and waved up at him with both arms, jumping and hollering...

Dwelling on the memory wouldn't do anybody any good now. Cal was gone, the last thing still anchoring Ben to this world.

The pull of the singularity contained in the cookpot dragged away what little colour and substance remained that was still Ben

Nabors, leaving him empty and weak. He dropped to his knees.

Ben untied the bootlace holding the

lid in place. “You were a good man, Cal. I wish there were a way to tell someone. I wish...”

He lifted the lid. A crisp breeze raked the top layer of ash. He could almost hear Cal's voice. *All you gotta do is wait. Old Lookout, remember?*

Ben leaned forward and glanced over the edge. The fall didn't frighten him. At the bottom there would be an *end*.

His fingers tightened on the cookpot's rim. “I'm sorry, Cal. You were wrong about me.”

He rose to his feet and tipped the pot towards Old Lookout's base. Cal's ashes rained down over the clinging roots and gathered into drifts like snow.

Ben turned away and looked out over the abyss. One little step and his long exile would be over. One simple thing.

He lifted his foot.

A bright light glimmered down in the clearing by the lake.

Ben blinked and rubbed his eyes — surely he was dreaming — but when he opened them again, the light was still there, intensifying, the telltale periwinkle hue unmistakable.

A sharp breeze blew, throwing off his balance.

He grabbed instinctively for Old Lookout. The same warmth he'd felt earlier swept through his fingers, his arm and deep into his heart. All the vitality and hope that had vanished into the singularity slammed back into him so hard his whole body trembled.

Protocol said a portal should be open for two hours, but protocol had failed him for more years than he could count. What if the portal failed before he could reach it? What if it was nothing more than a hallucination conjured by a mind left to die alone? Was it worth the risk of caring enough to try?

A gritty breeze brushed against his face — the last remnants of Cal, who'd left his little girl behind. Ben straightened and drew in a breath. He could do this. *He had to.*

Heart racing, Ben lowered himself over the cliff edge. Foothold after foothold. Hand over hand. For Cal and his Abigail.

Simple things. ■

Rebecca Birch is a Seattle resident who has been published in markets including Nature, Cricket and Flash Fiction Online. You can find her online at www.wordsofbirch.com.

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