

Elizabeth Terrell

Ingrid



Runner-Up

When I wake up with a dewy feeling between my legs, I ask God, if he's listening, about our punishment. I can't decide what's worse: the fact that he has presented me with fertility, or that he has taken it away from everyone else. Granted, I don't blame him. We're all fucked anyway.

According to the rest of the world, I'm Project L—meaning I am the 12th person discovered fertile. I was Ingrid before I was given my new identification, but anyone who ever meant something to me sold me out to “save the world.” I think it's a bunch of bullshit, really; all of these lab rats keep probing me as if I can birth a new generation.

The panic started when the Artifice—the artificial uterus, that is—stopped working. First, there were a lot of miscarriages, but many people dismissed the idea that something was wrong because they had grown too comfortable with millions of uteri giving birth to their children. Eventually, babies stopped showing up—that's when everyone started realizing they were screwed. People tried reverting back to natural birth but, as the old saying goes, if you don't use it, you lose it. Try as he could, John couldn't knock up Jane, and humans found themselves to be

the cause of the apocalypse.

People get really religious when they're afraid. My mom's generation is all about the God stuff, so much so that they began the Great Effort, a global movement that illegally and desperately destroyed every Artifice possible in the name of 'insert-creator's-name-here.' It didn't matter which God someone believed in as long as they could get into the labs and tear apart what they could. The Effort hardly met any resistance; even the doctors behind everything were scrambling for hope.

The original mission was to restore human values and morals in society so that God could let us breed again. However, as time passed, it has become the supposed last hope of being granted entry to Heaven after we all die out. I'm not sure I quite believe that, though—who are we to speak for the Holy?

"We're ready for you, Ingrid," a voice announces over the intercom.

After being thoroughly bathed by a team of people who I believe are determined to prune me, I am handed a disposable gown, thin white shorts to cover my posterior, and a pair of loose fitting socks. I dress myself—though I hardly see the point, everyone who scrubbed me is still at my side—and let them assist me to the elevator. Once inside, a blindfold is wrapped around my head several times so I cannot see which floor we are going to. Once the elevator dings, and the doors open, a hand softly presses against the small of my back and leads me through a hallway to the door of our final destination. When the blindfold is lifted, I see two unarmed guards standing on either side of the thick silver door. My team backs away from me, a guard opens a door, and I am given a false sense of privacy as I enter the room. I know there are cameras everywhere, and that my son and I are never alone.

"Mommy!" Liam says, and it's enough to make a lot of things better.

Before Liam was born, I was assumed to be just like everyone else—hopeless in a deserted world. I came from an Artifice, so my mom and dad presumed I was doomed as fewer and fewer babies were born. Dad committed suicide when I was little. My parents had tried to make a sibling for me, but the doctors revealed that the plague had struck them, too. He couldn't handle it, but my mom could. She raised me to believe in the Great Effort, and to believe that God would guide us through.

She believed there was a reason for everything—including all of the evil surrounding us.

I can't quite say I believe in that, though, because God took her

from me. It was the first day of my period, ever, and I remember asking her what it felt like to be fertile. She told me it didn't feel like much, but it gave her hope when she had it. I slept beside her that night, telling her how much I wanted to give her hope. When I woke up the next morning, she was unresponsive. When the medics came, they told me that the reason she wasn't responding was because she had died. Brain aneurysm. There was nothing I could do.

Thus, I became an orphan. The orphanage they sent me to sat on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean and used to be an aquarium. We didn't have rooms, but we were split into sections and slept in the spaces where exhibits once were. I remember being the youngest one there, even though I was already twelve years old. The older kids treated me like I was one of them. During my time of grief, they were the ones to pull me through. We knew we were the end, so we made the most of it. We would sneak out onto the beach at night until we found our way to the mounds—they were filled with sand spurs that clung to us like leeches, but they were the only way for us to travel discreetly. Once we got to the shacks, we would split up and go our own ways in hopes of entertainment. Not much happened—a lot of us broke into an abandoned cottage that was way too big to be ignored. We would mainly complain about everything, and then some. A few people hooked up in the bedrooms upstairs, some decided to drink and smoke their worries away, while Jim and I talked. Just talked.

There was some new law passed in which girls of birthing age were required to have pregnancy tests every month. Jim and I thought it was funny, especially since we considered it useless. He would joke about getting me pregnant, which made me feel incredibly awkward despite the fact that I thought I was infertile.

When I was fourteen, I guess our talking turned into something more. I wasn't aware of it, but he was. He had just turned eighteen and was going to be 'removed' from the orphanage later that week, and I was the only person who gave a shit about him leaving. He was upset beyond belief. I gave him a hug to make him feel better, but I think he thought it was something more. I wasn't comfortable with him on top of me, or inside of me, but I let him continue because, if I hadn't, I would've lost my best friend.

When I went in for my pregnancy test the next month, I was obviously not expecting positive results. After multiple re-tests and scans, I was declared pregnant, and was formally told that I had twenty-four hours to pack my things and prepare for life in a lab. After two years of complete freedom, a lab was the last place I wanted to go. I

searched for Jim at all of his work spots. I finally found him behind the counter of the deli section at a grocery store and begged him to follow me outside, in private. When he followed me, I told him everything—from my pregnancy, to needing to hide away. He agreed to help me, and that night we stowed away in the basement of the cottage with only a small flashlight for light.

I didn't leave the basement for days, but I would open the door to the stairs to let some sunlight in. Jim would sneak out at night and steal food from the grocery. One morning, he woke me up and told me I needed more vitamin D or I would die. After heavy persuasion, I listened. It wasn't really a mistake; the cops would have come to escort me away anyway—Jim only made it graceful. He had been paid off to give me to them, and when I asked him why he betrayed me, he said to save the world. They took him, too, but he was far less valuable at the moment. *I* had the living child inside of me.

“Have you seen your daddy lately?” I ask Liam. He nods and pulls my hair.

“Mhm, but I wish I could see you both right now,” he chirps. I wonder if I was this cute when I was five years old.

“Maybe someday you will,” I lie, and I feel guilty for it. Jim and I are not on speaking terms, nor will we ever be.

“I wish I could,” he repeats.

I wish I could tell him everything. I want to say, “Liam, your dad is a very bad man,” but I can't. Maybe it was to save the world, but I think it was greed. Karma has placed him where he belongs, though—in the labs, just like me. Or maybe that was God's doing. Anyway, the chances of Liam seeing us together are as slim as us getting out of here. It's not *completely* my fault—the nurses have seen how we act around each other, and refuse to put Liam in the middle of it. I guess it's for the best.

Even though his conception was unfair, and even though it has meant living in this giant, lifeless building, I'm glad I have my son. He is worth it. If only most of the other projects could feel the same way.

Chloe and Ephraim, A and B, turned themselves in—they were the only people in the known world to have produced a baby, at the time. The doctors performed several tests on the baby and exhausted it—then down came baby, cradle and all. They begged Chloe and Ephraim to produce another child, but they refused. Rumor has it that they have a dead Artifice sitting around somewhere that pumped out as many of their babies as possible with the DNA from their tests. Ephraim wants to

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know the truth, but Chloe tells him that even if the babies exist and have their genes, they aren't actually theirs—they had belonged to science from the second that Ephraim called the police.

Esther and Marcus didn't let science kill their baby. Instead, they killed the baby themselves. Most of the projects who once lived on the grid think that the two are terrible, but the way I see it is that they were always wanderers—homeless, living under houses, and resistant to the government. Esther never took a monthly pregnancy test; she found out about her pregnancy when a small bump started taking over her body. She and Marcus agreed to kill the baby so that they would never be roped into the experiments, and so that the baby wouldn't have to experience the apocalypse. Marcus brought her all the booze imaginable, and six months later she had a miscarriage. They wouldn't have been caught if they hadn't made a habit of visiting the burial site every day. Police got suspicious, found and dug the baby up, and then dragged the couple to the lab. Similar to Chloe and Ephraim, they refused to reproduce again.

Karmel and Omar have a girl who is seven years old, and they are allowed to see her twice a week, while Jim and I have to divide our visits with Liam. Their child's name is Kalila, and she has the most beautifully dark complexion. She and Liam have thirty-minute play dates every day, or so I'm told, so that the kids can learn to have social interactions outside of the family and the caretakers. Karmel often tells me she's so glad that the two are friends; we can't imagine what life would be like in the apocalypse without any friends.

The remaining four—Projects G,H,I, and J—took their chance to get out of here and jumped. No one knows what happened to their children. The outside world roared in anger, saying they couldn't believe that our living conditions were so poor that we would commit suicide. To those critics, I say, have you ever lain on a table for several hours, letting people stick things up you, in you, and in your face, all the while asking you questions you don't have the answer to?

I'd take the chance, but I need be with Liam for as long as I can. Besides—there are nets outside of the windows now. I'd be caught like a bug in a web, then forced back to being torn apart.



“How was your visit with Liam?” Chloe asks me. It's dinner, and all of the projects have congregated around the same table per usual. I sit as far away as I can from Jim, but avoiding him completely is impossible. He sometimes tries to directly talk to me, but Esther and Marcus usually answer for me when they can.

"It was like every other visit. He insists on asking me questions. Recently he has become persistent in figuring out some things," I tell her quietly, so that Jim won't hear.

"What's he trying to figure out?" Jim inquires, and I feel the joints in my hand stiffen while I ball my hands into fists. This isn't the type of question my friends can answer.

"He's trying to figure out... Why..." I begin.

"Why what?"

"Why he doesn't see us together," I hesitantly reveal. "He knows that Kalila sees *her* parents together, so I suppose he's a little jealous."

"Why doesn't he see us together?" Jim presses further.

"Jim, that's enough," Marcus grumbles, and the table goes silent.

Omar and Karmel usually try to lighten the mood with their stories about Kalila, but today they are just as beaten down as the rest of us.

"I don't see the point anymore," Omar mumbles. Karmel puts her hand on his shoulder and gently rubs his back. "Why is humanity so desperate to keep surviving? The animals that met extinction before us at least did it with grace; they accepted their fate and died out. Why can we not accept it?"

We all sit, quietly, for the remainder of dinner. I think about Omar's question—why can't we accept our fate? I want to argue that it's because we're not just animals, we're *rational* animals. But then I wonder, are we? Our 'rationality' landed us here, in this condition, only to ask more questions. What would have happened without the Artifice? I ask God all the time. He never answers, but I have this feeling that we wouldn't have ended up like this.

Maybe that's his answer.

I take my food tray to the drop-off, and Karmel follows me.

"You usually stay back and sit awhile with Omar. Is something wrong?" I ask as I walk in the direction of my unit. She matches my pace and follows me.

"Ing, I have a bad feeling," she tells me.

"I wonder why. It's not like humanity is ending, or something like that," I sarcastically mumble. We have just exited the dining hall, and the doors we passed have closed. Karmel grabs my arm and stops me from walking any further.

"You don't understand," she sighs. "I had a dream."

"Lots of people do."

"I dreamed that tomorrow's the day," she blurts. The light in her

eyes tells me that she's serious.

"Should I believe you're a prophet?" I laugh to break tension, but her demeanor remains the same.

"Until tomorrow passes," she suggests. "Ing, we only have a few hours to come to peace with ourselves. If there's anything you need to take care of before we die, I suggest you do it."

"Karmel," I hesitantly begin, "I don't know where this is coming from. Seriously, is everything okay?"

"You have to believe me," she pleads. "I know you want an apology from Jim, and I know you wouldn't want to die without Liam seeing you together." Now she's speaking outside her limits, and I don't want to hear her tell me my business. I keep marching forward, desperate to get to my unit so that I can close the door and go to bed—the closest thing that I can compare to death. This heavy bullshit has come from the middle of nowhere and Karmel can't make me listen anymore than God could at this moment. "He knows you're angry!"

The shout echoes down the hall, and I turn to face her again and roll my eyes.

"And who would that be?"

"He knows you're angry. He knows you hate him. But he *had* to give you your past so that you would end up here."

"Are you talking about God?"

"I'm talking about whoever gave me the dream," she answers.

"Why don't you have another dream and ask him what good I am doing him by ending up here?" I sharply request. "What good could possibly come out of this? He is definitely not a *good* God."

"We don't understand him at all. If we did, wouldn't we be Gods?" She responds. "What you're going through has a purpose. You should accept that."

And now she reminds me of my mother. Mom believed there was a reason for everything—including all of the evil surrounding us.



I can't fall asleep. I finally roll over onto my back and reach my arms for the edges of the bed—I feel like I need to hold onto something in order to breathe. I think about all that has happened today. I woke up to a pool of blood in my sheets. I saw my son, and for the first time ever I told him that he might be able to see his father and me together.

I talked to Jim enough to convince him to 'forfeit' his time with Liam for later in the week so that the nurses would let us see our son, together, for the first and last time (if Karmel has it right). After we

watched our son fall asleep in our laps, he finally apologized for the bad things he had done. At first, I didn't want to, but Karmel talked me into it—I finally forgave him.

My cramps become exceedingly worse, but I only faintly recognize them in my dreams. The room starts to violently shake, and I feel my body tremor along with it. It continues to get worse, with thunder and lightning striking every corner of the earth. Fire consumes me, but I don't mind—I am clothed with the sun and the stars.