

## 1 Serve Your Country, Conserve Your Water, Observe Your Neighbor

Our Mom tended to be philosophical when she played Would You Rather.

Thomas, would you rather be thunder or lightning? Snow or fire? A question mark or period? Red or yellow?

Dad never played. He even refused to answer the easy questions like would you rather kiss Marilyn Monroe or Madonna? He'd shake his head, smile at Mom, but always claim he just liked to listen.

I still play my own version with Dustin even though I'm eighteen now, and it's been over a year since we've seen our parents.

"Would you rather I kick your ass or you hurry it up?" I say, and Dustin stops to ponder this before realizing I'm not kidding.

"Hurry it up?"

"Move," I say, and he does.

He has to.

I'm all he has now.

It's seven a.m. and we've got four hours of water-patrol ahead of us. While Dustin gets dressed, I toss his used body-wipe in the bin and head outside to wait.

At least he's stopped asking to take showers.

There's that anyway.

When he finally comes out of the house, Dustin's wearing the state-mandated dust mask with his Officer of Sustainability jacket zipped up to his nose. The logo, a big drop of blue water wearing hand-cuffs, covers his entire nine-year-old torso.

"Let's do this," he says and struts off ahead of me, ticket book at the ready.

Normally I'd be doing this on my own, but it's summer, so Dustin's helping out, earning his badge. Nearly twelve months now and no rain. And the year before we had a whopping two inches. Just enough to keep the hinges of the world oiled.

We walk, without incident, for a solid hour before being heckled by a Leftover sitting on a cardboard box. There's a liter of brown-colored water at his feet. Leftovers are what most people call them. The government's official name for them is "The Internally Displaced."

"Hey, I think I hear somebody watering their lawn! You guys better go arrest them!"

Even from this distance, I can see his lips are cracked and torn. Dustin has his pen out before the guy finishes his sentence.

"Forget it," I say, grabbing Dustin by the collar before he can cross the street.

"But he's worth at least 50 water points."

Water points: an incentive plan cooked up by the powers that be. For every 1000 water points, you get a 5-gallon drum of fresh water.

"We've got plenty without him, D. This isn't a game."

"What if Mom and Dad don't come back? What if they stop giving us their rations? Then what?"

"Then we get by like everybody else."

Dustin tucks his ticket book back inside his jacket, sticks the pen behind his ear and contents himself by taking a long, unnecessary drink. Then he wipes his mouth on his sleeve and says, "When are they coming back anyway?"

"When Dad finishes his research and figures this mess out. We've gone through this how many times now?"

"A million."

"C'mon," I say. "Let's go find some electricity-bandits. That'll make you feel better."

We pass by a few abandoned stores, the insides all gutted long ago. One has a banner pasted over whatever the old name was.

*The Water Barter.*

At least they tried.

We walk off the main road, down a few side streets, straight into the middle of nowhere and see a boy about Dustin's age riding a bicycle, his belly just starting to distend. He stops and waves when he sees us, thinks we're the good guys.

I tell Dustin to throw him a bottle of water and Dustin just looks at me like do-I-have-to, but he does it anyway. We watch the kid pump toward the bottle, his spindly legs coming to life. When he picks the water up, he waves it in the air in thanks, then goes back to pedaling more dust.

I keep an eye on Dustin, see if he's registered the fact that the kid could be him if things were different.

But he just seems annoyed.

It isn't much longer before we spot some lights peeking out from a curtained basement window. We knock on the door, and, sure enough, the lights go out. A woman, forty something, still wearing her bathrobe, opens the door. She's got the thirst. It happens when you drink too much recycled water.

Her lips look like two dead worms.

"Hi, ma'am. We're with the Sustainability Unit. Would you mind if we came in, took a look around?"

I know the look she's giving me. Our dog used to do the same thing after he peed the carpet.

"Be my guest," she says. "And who's this little cutie-pie?"

She doesn't know it yet, but she just earned herself an extra ticket. Maybe ten.

"This is Cadet Dustin," I say and give her a look she interprets perfectly.

“Oh, you’ll have to forgive me. It’s just that I haven’t seen such a handsome cadet before.”

Dustin, having none of it, says, “The basement?”

I shrug and she leads us down the hallway. On the way, I peek my head into her bathroom, note the illegal tube running from her Recycler into a hole in the tiled floor. She must have just gone because the thing is still agitating, filtering out the urine, turning it into clear drops of water to be used for laundry, dishes, that sort of thing. On the side of the 5-gallon plastic jug, in big black letters, it says:

NOT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION.

The basement holds the usual Unforgivables: crude hydroponics, some lettuce, carrots, tomatoes. The government made indoor-gardening illegal last year since it uses up too much electricity. Well, that and people don’t tend to share what they grow inside.

The only real surprise here is the row of flowers.

“Dragon Lilies were his favorite. My husband’s, I mean,” the woman explains. “He died last year. I share with others when I have enough. Please, you have to understand.”

I want to grab her hand, put my arm around her, sit down and have a nice big salad, eat every last morsel of evidence with her, tell her she has no idea how much I do understand.

“I still have to write you up for this. They’ll probably just garnish a few liters, put you on water- probation for a year. It won’t be so bad.”

“Not so bad?” she starts to say, but stops when she notices Dustin scribbling away.

“Let me see that,” I say and take the pad from him.

“Eight Unforgivables,” Dustin says. “And that’s not counting the fan you have on upstairs.”

“Cadet Dustin,” I say. “Could you go outside and check the perimeters, make sure we didn’t miss anything?”

“Gotcha,” he says and actually goes so far as to hitch up his pants before heading upstairs.

“I’m already getting by on less than most,” the woman begins, her hand rubbing her neck, the robe parting just a touch. “Isn’t there something we can work out, some sort of community service I could perform?”

I take a step back, cough some of the color back into my face. “Here,” I say and only hand her two of the tickets. “Just pay these and dismantle the greenhouse, okay?”

Her eyes go all big and soft and I hurry out of the basement before she can get to me. When me and Dustin head down the street, he eyes me suspiciously.

“How many did you give her?”

“Eight,” I lie. “Nice work, partner.”

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After our shift, Dustin and I get cleaned up for our date with Jerusha. She asked me to bring Dustin along to the Water Rally, said she had a surprise for him afterward. Jerusha’s what we call a Bootlegger: someone who makes un-recycled water and sells it on the black market. Dustin adores her, but I’m a little worried about what’ll happen if he finds out about her hobby.

The Water Rally is supposed to be a formal event, so I go through Dad’s closet, pick out one of his brown tweed numbers, the kind with the patches in the elbows. I’m hoping Jerusha will get a kick out of me looking smart for once.

When I get downstairs, Dustin’s standing in the middle of the room wearing his old Halloween costume. Tony the Tiger. From his favorite cereal. Back when we still had milk. And cereal.

“Dustin, what the...?”

“You said get dressed up.”

“I meant wear something nice.”

“This is nice. Wait, no, it’s GRRRR--”

“Stop. Where’s your I.D.?”

We were told to wear our badges on a lanyard. For security reasons. Dustin pulls up his tail. His badge is taped to Tony’s sphincter.

“Wonderful. I’m sure Sarge will love that.”

When we get to the party, there are giant banners hanging everywhere with slogans written in giant green letters.

WATER IS A STATE OF MIND! YOU REIGN!

Dustin’s costume, it turns out, is a big hit. One of the officials even comes over, shakes both our hands, says that maybe next year they’ll have a real costume party.

Dustin jumps up and down at this, claps his paws and growls, “That’s GRRRRREEEEAAAT!”

The guy eats it up.

We stop by a few of the demonstration tables as we make our way to the buffet stations, not wanting to appear in too big of a hurry. There are pamphlets about new Recyclers, some with a focus on women’s needs. They’re pink and smoother looking than the clunky one we have at home.

Next is a booth on how to police your neighborhood and turn in Violators: Serve, Conserve, Observe. Basically, it’s teaching regular citizens how to do our job. Free video cameras are available from the government if they want to set up surveillance on a suspect neighbor. There’s even a poster of a man brandishing a knife, a dead garden hose in his other hand.

Like a trophy photo.

Give me a break.

We move on, eventually finding Jerusha hovering around the buffet they have set up. There's shrimp. Well, not real shrimp. Shrimp-flavored soyfu or something. Jerusha looks amazing, dressed in a black one-piece that stops just above her knees.

"I didn't know Tony the Tiger was coming!"

"Next year they're having a costume party," Dustin brags. "All because of me."

"Too bad it's not this year. You'd win hands down, kiddo."

Dustin wags his tail. "You going to watch the speech with us?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world. Nothing I like better than watching people lie through their teeth."

We watch the "hysteria", as Jerusha calls it, from the nosebleed seats. Everybody else is jostling down below, crowding the main stage like our President's some kind of rock star. Which, in a way, I guess he is. They even have his face beaming down from a gigantic 4-sided screen set up above the crowd. His beatific eyes about a foot-wide each.

"How come they get to have a TV?" Dustin wants to know.

"Because they're pigs," Jerusha says and pops a fake shrimp in her mouth.

"I don't get it."

"Don't think of it as a TV," I tell him. "It's more like a screen. So we can see him better."

"Oh," he says, but I can tell he isn't buying it.

*If I could have your attention for a moment, please.*

The crowd quiets down, presses closer to the stage.

*The first thing I'd like to address are the rumors that there's been precipitation in California. Unfortunately, that's a blatant un-truth. Now believe me, there's nothing more I wish were true. We believe the rumor was started by some of our more unsavory citizens who would like nothing better than to undermine Operation Green. We, as a country, must focus on sustaining our current water economy, working as a whole so we can overcome this greatest environmental challenge of our time. Now who's with me?*

The crowd erupts. I even start to clap but stop once I notice Jerusha glaring at me.

“Do you even know why you're clapping?”

“Of course, I do,” I say, zero conviction in my voice.

*Thank you, my friends! Thank you! Now, with that nasty bit of business out of the way, let's get to what you're all waiting for. The Water Awards!*

More frenzied applause.

I sit on my hands.

*As you know, each month we reward one exceptional citizen with a twenty-gallon supply of pure un-recycled water. This month, for outstanding dedication to the Sustainability Movement, we award Citizen Hugh Penly for the courageous act of turning in his neighbor for washing their electric car. Hugh, are you out there? Come on up here! I want our citizens to see what a true hero looks like!*

An elderly man wearing an old Mariner's baseball hat emerges from the crowd, makes his way to the podium as the crowd chants, “Hugh! Hugh! Hugh!” When they roll out the five-gallon drums of water, the man nearly breaks down in tears. A fairly moving scene, but one cut short when Jerusha stands up.

“C'mon, we're leaving. I can't stomach this any longer.”

As we make our exit, we get a few strange looks. Like we're nuts for leaving just when things are getting good.

Once we get outside Jerusha squats down next to Dustin, and he climbs up without a word.



Piggy-back time.

It's nice. Something a mother might do.

“You boys game for a real party? Something that isn't sanctioned by fascists?”

I knew there would be something like this. There always is with Jerusha. Probably some lame party with wanna-be Leftovers in scruffy beards, none of them fully weaned off the grid's tit yet but doing everything possible to look like they are.

“I'm game,” Dustin says and uses his tail like a whip to spur Jerusha on. “Gitty up!”

“It depends on where the party is,” I say, like the decision hasn't already been made.

“Not far. C'mon.”

Jerusha trots off, Dustin holding onto her black hair like the reins of some magical horse. The streets are deserted, not one car out since nearly everybody in their right mind is at the rally. After about five blocks, Jerusha plops Dustin down on the sidewalk and raps four times on a metal warehouse door.

A peep hole slides open, then quickly shuts again.

“I don't know about this,” I murmur and Jerusha lowers her eyes at me, says, “Of course you don't know. That's the whole point, isn't it?”

Before I can come up with a response, the door opens and we're ushered in by a kid in a black suit. It's ten times more expensive than the hand-me-down I'm wearing.

“Welcome, comrades,” he says and acknowledges Jerusha by kissing her on both cheeks, all European-like. I couldn't dislike the guy more. “I see you brought some defectors.”

“Not exactly,” Jerusha says, eyeballing me. “But I'll vouch for them.”

“Whatever you say, Jerusha. But they're your responsibility.”

Jerusha grabs one of Dustin's paws. “C'mon. Stick close to me.”

She leads us through a dark and seemingly empty warehouse until we reach a ladder mounted to a wall.

“Where’s that go?” Dustin asks.

“To the roof. Where else?”

Jerusha turns to me, flicks my lanyard. “You might want to lose that.”

I look down, and, sure enough, my ID is hanging out. Luckily it’s face down, my Water-cop face still hidden.

“Right,” I say and stuff it into my breast pocket.

Dustin bends over, wags his tiger-butt at Jerusha. “What about me?”

“You’ll be fine, honey. Just don’t go doodie anywhere, okay?”

I pictured hot tubs, naked people drinking illegal beer, multiple Unforgivables, Dustin having a heart attack trying to hand out all the tickets. But when we get on the roof, we find only a small swarm of dancing teenagers.

Dustin leans into Jerusha, whispers, “These aren’t Leftovers, are they?”

“Leftovers? This isn’t the day after Thanksgiving, honey. These are your neighbors.”

A soft mist falls over the crowd and people start twirling, rubbing the falling water into their clothes. Behind the crowd I see a guy holding a sprinkler. I nudge Dustin, point to the rain-maker, and Dustin’s jaw drops.

I start to say something, but Jerusha grabs his hand before I can get a word out.

“It’s supposed to encourage the real thing!” Jerusha shouts, spinning Dustin around under the fake rain. “Wonderful, isn’t it?”

I nod but can’t help wondering if they’re using Recycled water, drenching everybody in what isn’t even fit to drink. I lean against a railing, watch as some of the dancers run their fingers blissfully through their urine-soaked hair.

“Wasn’t that amazing?” Jerusha asks when the rain ends. “Cleansing, don’t you think?”

“Do you know what the punishment is for--”

Again, Jerusha doesn’t let me finish. She picks Dustin up, his fur all matted down. “Who cares what sour puss thinks. What does Tony the Tiger think? Fun stuff?”

“Awesome stuff! What was that thing making all the water come out?”

If I don’t step in, I can see Dustin bringing this up at headquarters and getting us all in trouble.

“That, Dustin, was an antique. Something from the old days. Something that’s obsolete now.”

Jerusha squats down beside him as the others make their way back down the ladder. “It’s called a sprinkler, Dustin. People used to place them on their lawns and children would run through them in the summer. Someday, with the help of people like this, we might have them again. Would you like that?”

Dustin turns to me, says, “Can we get a sprinkler?”

“No, we cannot. For one, they’re illegal. For two, they’re nearly impossible to find. Besides, what are we going to sprinkle? We don’t have a lawn.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

By the time we get to Jerusha’s house, it’s dark, her parents long asleep. Her parents think Jerusha’s an angel, living out in the garage so she can remain close to them. The fact that they’re being used as a cover has, I’m sure, never occurred to them.

They’re the opposite of Jerusha: good, obedient, scared citizens.

“Home illegal home,” she says, waiting for us by the garage.

“You live out here?” Dustin asks.

She doesn't answer, just unlocks the padlock and clean-and-jerks the garage door open. With a flip of a switch, we're doused in red light. A king-size bed with satin sheets sits in the middle of the garage.

"Whaddya think?"

Dustin immediately goes for the bed.

"What's up there?" He points to a second story loft with bed sheets hanging from the ceiling. It must be where she hides her paraphernalia, her water-making lab. "Can we go up?"

"That's my special place, Dustin. Sorry. Off limits for now."

I haven't turned her in.

There's my being head-over- heels in love with her, but also the fact that she knows where my mom and dad are. It works out well, a blackmail made in heaven since I can't imagine being chained to anything sexier than Jerusha.

*Would you rather get laid or...*

"Mind your own business, D," I say. "Or you won't get to see the surprise."

"Surprise, surprise, surprise!" he yells, jumping up and down on the bed.

"First you have to keep a secret," Jerusha tells him. "Can you do that, Dustin?"

"I can do that."

"I thought so. How about you, Thomas?"

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

"No, I suppose you don't," Jerusha says and climbs the ladder to the loft.

"Do you think she has a sprinkler? Maybe some water pistols?" Dustin asks.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"That would be so awesome."

“No, it would not,” I say. Water-pistols are a major Unforgivable. “You know we can’t tell anybody about this, right? We’d both get in big, big trouble.”

Dustin plops down on the bed, says, “Don’t be such a wet rag, Thomas.”

“You don’t even know what that means.”

“Do too!”

Jerusha is standing at the top of the ladder, her black dress replaced by a pair of bulky flannel pajamas.

“Thomas, would you give me a hand with this?”

She’s holding something wrapped in a white bed sheet. I climb half-way up, help her walk it down.

“Ready?” she says once we set it on a table, but instead of waiting for an answer, Jerusha whips the sheet off. “Ta-da!”

“A TV!” Dustin says, standing on the bed again. “Does it work?”

Major, major Unforgivable.

Anyone caught possessing movies of any kind will automatically be placed in Rehabilitation.

I remember the DVD burnings held on weekends, the bonus water-points handed out for every ten movies burned. No longer would we gorge ourselves on distraction, no longer would we amuse ourselves into submission.

“Where did you get that thing?” I say, not quite wanting to hear the answer.

“Here,” she says and hands me an old VCR tape. “Make yourself useful.”

Jerusha drags an old car battery out from under the table, goes about threading the modified cord onto the terminals. It’s one of those old combo TV/VCR deals. As I slide the tape in, Dustin puts his hands on his lap, morphs into good-little-boy. When the images from Star Wars start to fill the twelve-inch screen, Dustin’s mouth doesn’t seem able to close.

Once Jerusha is satisfied that Dustin is sufficiently hooked, she fluffs a few pillows, gives me a nod toward the loft.

“Dustin, honey, I need to go upstairs with your brother for awhile. Will you be okay down here?”

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever.”

“Give me two minutes,” Jerusha says and cranks the volume before disappearing up the ladder.

I count out two long minutes in my head, then follow after. When I part the bed sheets at the top of the ladder, Jerusha is standing next to a claw-foot bathtub filled with soapy water, the steam slowly rising, a blue towel wrapped around her.

“You can’t just--”

“I can, Thomas. You should know that by now.” She lifts her leg up, the towel opening up along her thighs in a V as she dips her toes in. “When’s the last time you had a real bath?”

Number One on the list of Unforgivables.

I can’t speak.

*Would you rather watch R2D2 or take a bath with Jerusha?*

“High school,” she says. “Am I right?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

“Where’d you get all the water?”

“Take your clothes off.” Jerusha drops the towel to the floor, starts coming toward me and I back away, worried about Dustin. “We’re just taking a bath, Thomas. What do you think is going to happen?” Her smile widens. “He can’t hear us anyway.”

I undress, sit down in the tub, barricade my knees against my chest as the water envelopes me like smoke. An entire tub full, hot enough to turn my legs a deep pink. It feels pornographic.

So pure, it's dirty.

"Now relax." Jerusha takes her hand, tugs at one of my feet so that my leg slides down along her thighs. "That's better." Her hair is spread out against the back of the tub like a shiny black fan. I can't stop staring. "Feels good, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah," I say, my voice quivering like the surface of the water.

Jerusha leans forward, places her mouth against my knee, gives it a soft bite. The world pulses and pounds in my ears as she lies back with this pleased look on her face. I close my eyes, listening to the sounds of light sabers and blasters filtering up from below. I stay that way for I don't know how long, but by the time I open my eyes again, the water's almost cool.

Jerusha, smiling that illegal smile of hers, says, "I guess that makes you a Violator now, too."

"If Dustin wasn't here," I start to say. "I'd violate more than--"

"Oh God, I forgot about him," she says and pulls herself out of the water, starts drying herself with one foot on the tub, giving me an eyeful.

"You like that?" she says and drapes the towel over my head. "Be a good boy and maybe you'll get some tomorrow."

With that she climbs back into her pajamas and heads back down to Dustin. I dry myself with Jerusha's towel, rub her smell as deeply as I can into my own skin before putting my clothes back on.

I've been so preoccupied that I haven't had time to really look at her water-brewing system. I've seen them before, but this one is especially tricked out. There's a car battery on the floor, jumper cables hooked up to an iron rod that leads to a small skylight in the roof. Aluminum foil covers the bottom of the skylight while plastic tubing drips down like an IV into a barrel. It must have taken her a month to get enough water for just the one bath.

I feel honored almost to the point of tears.

By the time I make it downstairs, the tape's sticking out of the VCR and Dustin's fast asleep on the end of the bed. Jerusha's already turned the TV off, covered Dustin with a blanket.

That night I fall asleep with my arm around Jerusha, her back arched into my chest as I dream of flash floods, thunder and lightning, showers, tsunamis.



## Oregon Mourning

The lake's been electrocuted again,  
the mist sizzling  
from its bald surface,  
the fish all capsizing  
while the loons keen.

Soon the cicadas, too,  
will throw their voices  
across the water  
in protest.

i can almost remember how all this used to look,  
back before they passed sentence  
on all the good things.