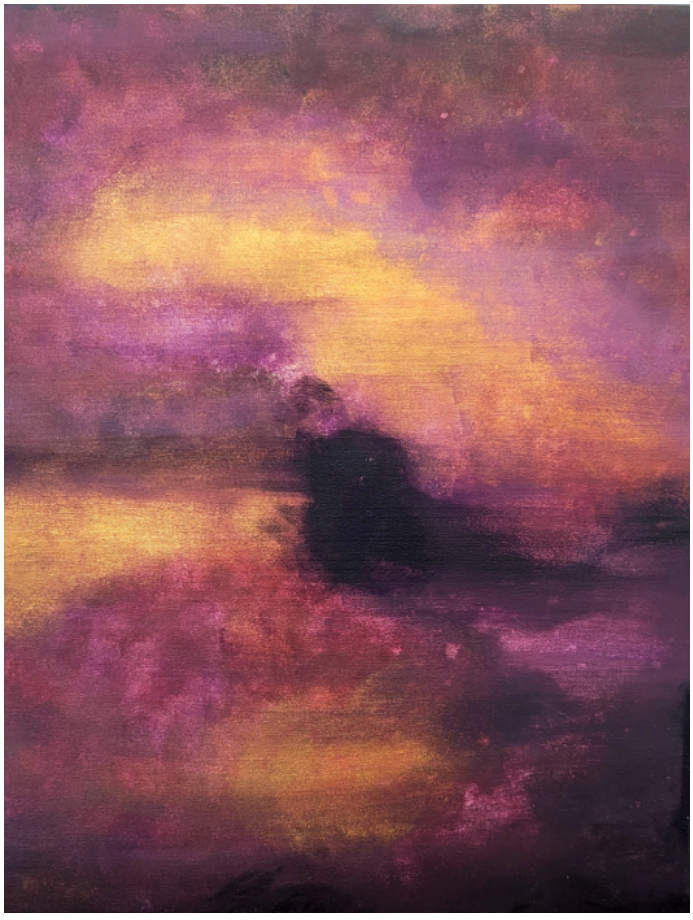
SHORT STORY

Treats for Callie

by C. C. Thybro



"Transition" by Marleah Singleton

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I want to leave.

Though perhaps calling it a want makes it seem paltry, when in truth it's a *need*. Like fresh air, water and other people. But there's only me and Callie here. She's a loyal German Shepherd and I've grown to love her, but we're running out of time. I've lost count of the days. It's like time warps in here, bending over backwards until clocks stop working and you can hardly tell day from night. Everything is covered in fog and ashes, keeping out sunlight and stars alike.

The screech of tires on wet asphalt jerks me from my thoughts. Through the thick foliage of the bush, I can see the dimmed yellow of the cab coming to a smooth stop right next to our hiding place. I pull Callie closer to my chest as I make sure the tent-like raincoat is covering us both, shielding us from prying eyes and whatever remains of the rain clinging to leaves and branches. We're safe. For now. But both Callie and I have gone perfectly still.

Outside my bush, someone's already waiting for the cab. It's a woman and her child. Their clothes look dusty but well kept. They are in their Sunday best. They should be wearing protective gear and the fact that they aren't makes my skin ripple with goosebumps.

The child seems to be all that's keeping the woman on her feet. I should get up, go out and offer them a hand, and then maybe I could finally ask the cab driver to get me out, even if I can't pay him.

The cab was probably bright yellow once upon a time, but now it's faded and the rain has stripped the color from the coating, leaving it with gray streaks down the sides.

I shift and Callie whines low in her throat. She's pushing against me, shivering and hiding her head under my arm.

"What's the matter?" I move my lips soundlessly around the words as I stroke her ears.

I look back up and am startled, breath arrested in my throat. The child's looking straight at me. He's small. Can't be more than eight or nine but his gaze looks far older. We're meters apart, it's twilight and I shouldn't even be able to see his eyes, but I can. And he can see me. All my muscles seize up as I huddle under the bush like a preyed-upon animal.

The boy looks briefly at the adults, as if to make sure that no one is paying attention. He looks back at me and smiles. It's a small, private kind of smile filled with mirth, like we're sharing some hilarious inside joke.

I can see you.

Every sound seems lengthened somehow, like the crunch of loose gravel as the cab driver – a short, barrel-shaped man with dark hair and a waning hairline – gets out and holds the door

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for the two of them.

Even from the side, he looks kind. Kind enough that I want to bet my life on him. Sweat trickles under my arms and on my upper lip, instantly freezing upon contact with the air. I can't breathe.

No!

I need to warn him.

The child … Not everything is as it seems anymore, and I don't think this child is either.

I need to warn the kind man, who's helping them into his car, but my knees won't move except to shake as Callie whines softly in my ear.

The door closes.

He rounds the back of the cab, getting ready to leave with them.

"No," the word is more an exhalation than a word, and my lungs burn.

The car speeds off and the moment is lost in the same second I regain my breath.

"It's okay," I tell Callie, stroking her matted fur. "He'll be fine."

The taillights of the cab are already disappearing in the distance.

"We'll try again tomorrow."

I don't even know if it's possible. But the thing is … sometimes people disappear. Most times they come back, but sometimes … sometimes they stay gone. If they'd just died, their bodies would lie somewhere, rotting, but they're not. They've simply gone. Vanished.

I think it's because they've managed to cross the border. They've done the impossible: Gotten out.

I too, would very much like to vanish from this place.

Out past the fences and the barbed wires, past the fog of dying buildings and places. Away from the strange-coloured fire that never seems to die and makes the ground feel hotter than it ought to, even so far away from ground zero. The only person who seems to move about with impunity is this cab driver. He just appeared one day, and started picking up the people loitering by the side of the road, taking them elsewhere.

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“Maybe he kills them,” I told Callie the first time we saw him. It didn’t seem quite right. The weirdest thing about him is the fact that he’s here at all. I don’t think he originally was. I don’t know how I can tell, but I can. There’s a quality about him that makes him feel … more real, somehow. I’m not sure how else to describe it.

After everything they quarantined the area, nevermind that there were still people in here. I don’t know who made the decision to leave us for dead. Maybe they lie awake at night, knowing they’ve condemned us all to a slow, painful withering away. Starvation and worse. Maybe this will land them in hell, if you believe in that kind of thing. I feel like we’re the ones stuck in hell though, so maybe they think they did the right thing, treating us as if we are contagious, as if the strange coloured fire has somehow marked us, made us forever contaminated.

Maybe it’s even true. Maybe this was the best they could do; contain it.

Either way, they still did it.

And I still want to live, and that means that I, that *we*, need to leave.

We, the quarantined, are stuck in with the fire and the fog and the acid-like drops of rain that fall with regularity. And it wears on you.

“We’re running out of food,” I whisper to Callie as she nuzzles my hands and licks the last bit of chunky meat out of the can. We’ve ransacked the last house on this street and one measly can of meatballs was the entirety of the spoils.

Callie licks her snout and looks at me. Even now she looks at me, like I have the power to fix everything. She whimpers and prods her side with her nose. She’s been doing that more often lately. She’s sick, but the local vet has gone.

Like so many others.

Did she get out? The vet?

I haven’t found her body, but then; many got lost in the chaos, my neighbours and friends among them.

“There’s only the two of us left, isn’t that right, Callie?”

Callie wags her tail at me and I scratch her behind her ears. “I feel like I’ve always had you,” I tell her. But it’s not true. She didn’t use to be mine. But sometime after everything went sideways, she came out of the fog, whimpering because the ground hurt her feet. I helped her then, and she’s been helping me ever since. I’ve looked, but her owners seem to be long gone.

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But so are most people. Nothing left here except ruins, the abnormal fire and the blasted fog, which creeps into everything, hiding the entire world behind a gray veil. Or hiding us. I'm not sure which.

In the beginning they dug graves. Later, these became giant holes in the ground and shortly after that, everyone gave up and left, leaving the bodies in the street.

Everyone left after the big crack in the ground opened up, splitting the city clean in two. It burns with a strange, purple fire. The color makes it seem almost alien, like nothing else I've ever seen before.

I snuck close once, just to peek down into the rift. It was impossibly deep, lit from within by violet, violent flames which seemed to only grow bigger and meaner over time. I'm not entirely sure what's left to burn at this point, but the flames still send up their odd light at all hours.

Looking down that rift, down between the curls of asphalt, made me think that maybe people were right to quarantine this place.

The place, though, not the people.

My phone fizzled out and died on the first day, and every phone – landline and mobile – died around the same time. Maybe it was the proximity to ground zero? The radiation turning technology into duds?

This means that I need to hail the cab.

I have no money. But maybe he will take pity on me? Yes? No? It's worth the risk.

I have watched him drive by from the bushes at the same time every day. Sometimes he stops by the curb, not far from me, as if he's waiting for someone – me? But no, that can't be it. It makes no sense; he has no way of knowing that I need a ride. The bushes hide me, I know they do, I've made sure – and eventually he leaves to pick up other people. I've seen them. They're why I have so far hesitated to throw myself at his mercy. It's not just the kid.

It's hard to describe, but the tall woman with the crooked neck and the long, unkempt hair scares me. And so does the man with the felt-brimmed hat. It's always glistening with moisture as though he's been standing in the rain. But these days the rain is like acid falling from the sky. It melts people's faces off, makes them scream in agony. It's why I've made Callie little shoes out of plastic bags, so she doesn't have to step on the black-wet asphalt.

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The man with the hat seems fine though.

But Callie isn't, so as soon as the little yellow cab comes into view, I step onto the road.

Callie limps next to me. She needs a vet. A hospital. She needs to get out of this strange, foggy no man's land.

I stand in the middle of the road, exposed. It's twilight.

I wrinkle my brow. Was it twilight when I stepped onto the road? I shake my head, as if to clear it. Time has gotten weird in here, or maybe I have. Maybe it's the lack of food, sleep and clean water that's getting to me. Maybe it's whatever is in the air, invisible everywhere but the violet fires and the purple sky. Maybe it's always twilight here. Not that it matters.

"Stop," I croak, my voice sounds rusty from disuse, though I use it all the time, talking to Callie. Can a voice tell the difference between talking to an animal and another human being?

For a moment I think the cab will drive around me – through me – but it doesn't. It stops. The driver gets out, rounds the car and holds open the door for us.

This bit of old-fashioned kindness is what throws me, and for a long moment I simply stare at him, frozen in time like the rest of this place.

Callie has no such reservations.

"Hello, beautiful," the cab driver says and digs into his pockets to produce a treat before guiding her into the car.

"You know Callie?" I croak, stumbling closer. "Is she yours?"

"No, she's not." He turns thoughtful brown eyes at me. "But I've met her before." He speaks slowly, as if he's slowly reciting a play where we're simply speaking our lines and he's afraid of saying the wrong one. Or maybe I'm impatient because I'm in a hurry, making up stories, because it feels like control.

"Are you coming?" he asks when I don't respond.

I nod and with quick steps I go past him and settle into the car next to Callie. I lift my hand on an impulse, already reaching out as if to reassure myself that everything is okay and that I'm real, that we're both real, but he closes the car door between us before I make contact. It leaves a heavy, unsettled feeling in my gut. I swallow. Why did I want to touch him so badly? And why wouldn't he let me?

I shake my head and reach out to pet Callie instead. Her soft yet coarse fur is familiar and slowly my breath returns to its natural rhythm.

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The cab driver gets into the car and puts it into gear. The motor hums and the entire car hums with it. For some reason I find this comforting and I allow myself to melt back into the seats. Usually cabs smell awful, but this one smells like old tobacco, the kind my grandfather used to smoke before he died. It's an almost sweet, nostalgic smell, though I remember complaining about his smoking at the time.

"Where to?"

"I have no money!" The words tumble out of my mouth far louder than they need to.

He isn't startled, though he does tense up. "That's alright," he says. "I don't do this for the money."

"Then why?"

"Because someone needs to."

I want to kick his seat like an unruly kid.

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I have." He turns in his seat, so we can look at each other without mirrors. "So, where to?"

"Out," I whisper. I clear my throat. "I want *out*."

He nods, like it makes sense.

"I want out of this dead city." I wipe my eyes, trying not to choke on the words.

Callie whines next to me.

"Callie needs to get out too," I say. "She needs a vet." Saying it makes me feel like a child with a bad excuse, 'Sir, it's not *me*, it's the dog' "And I … I think I might need a doctor, too" I say it as if it's a shameful secret. "I've been forgetting things. Losing time."

"I know."

"You know?"

"You're not the only one," he says.

"You too?"

"No, but a lot of the people I ferry around have similar problems."

I don't know what to say to that. Does he mean I'm like the woman with the crooked neck? The child, or the man with the hat?

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He nods. “Alright,” he says, “I’ll take you to the border, but it’s up to you after that, you understand?”

“Y-yes,” I stutter. I feel like the conversation is moving too fast for me. I don’t understand it. It also feels odd in a different way. Like some sort of deja-vu. “Do you feel like everything goes in circles in here?”

He barks out a short laugh as he puts the car into gear. “All the time,” he says.

“Do you know what happened here?”

He goes quiet. “Don’t you?”

I shake my head. “Should I?” Outside it’s almost fully dark now, except that part of town that never gets dark anymore. I cling to Callie and she seems to cling back, leaning into me, a heavy, panting mess. She’s so warm against my cold fingers. Is she getting a fever? Or am I?

“When the plant exploded,” he began, “no one really knew what to do, except mirror Chernobyl and Fukushima while hopefully avoiding some of their mistakes in the aftermath.”

“I know *that*,” I say. Because that bit I do understand. “What confuses me is all of this.” I wave the arm I’m not using to cuddle Callie. “This weird limbo we’re caught in. Why aren’t they helping us? They’ve abandoned us, that much is clear, but I don’t understand *why*.”

“Not abandoned,” the cab driver says quietly, gaze catching mine in the rearview mirror.

“It sure fucking feels like it.” Saying it tastes like ash.

“I’m here, and I’m not leaving,” he says. The words sound heavy, weighed down. “But I hear you, I do. They should’ve gotten more people out.”

“And now they’ve just … shut it off. They can’t even put out the flames, but they’ve shut us off. Do they think we’ll go away if they don’t look at us long enough?” I try not to admit that it’s working; that we’ll die this way. That counts as going away, doesn’t it?

His gaze is heavy. Compassionate.

“We deserve better,” I say. I want to claw his face off. Or maybe turn the mirror away, so his sympathy can’t burn me.

“Yes,” he answers without hesitation. “You did. You do.”

Next to me Callie whimpers again. I stroke her fur. “Do you think she’ll make it?”

“I’m sorry.”

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I blink hard as I fight to swallow instead of screaming. I know he's right.

"Do you think she ever had a chance?" My voice remains soft, but that's only because I can't get enough air in to speak louder. "Or do you think she was doomed from the moment the plant exploded?" My face feels hot. "Do they even know why it did that?"

"I'm sorry," he repeats. "They said on the radio that it was a man-made error. But then, the whole thing is man-made, so I don't really know what that entails. Maybe it means that it was on purpose, or that someone fell asleep on a shift; or some technical error wasn't caught in time. The only thing everyone agrees on is that it originated in the control room."

"Imagine having all those people on your conscience." I want to stomp my feet, but I have to resign myself to sighing explosively as the gray fog whirls past outside. The cab driver avoids potholes and cracks in the road with practiced ease. Like he's driven this road many times before until he knows every twist, turn and hole like the back of his hand. It should be comforting, but instead it nags at me. Makes me feel like I'm forgetting something, like this route should be well-known to me too.

"I don't think they had to live with it very long." The cab drivers' voice is wry and it wrestles me away from my thoughts and the anxious buzzing under my skin. "They were at ground zero after all, I reckon they were the very first to die."

I flush and look down. I know that. I do. "So you think they've already paid the price?"

"I don't know if penance matters when it comes to things like this. But I also think that purgatory is more for the people who need forgiveness than the people who were harmed. Suffering doesn't help the dead after all. In that sense, I don't know if we're ever truly done paying for our sins."

"What are *you* paying for?"

His fingers tighten on the steering-wheel.

"What about you?" He turns the question back around with a direct, albeit brief, look in the rearview mirror. There's a tone of '*see how you like it*' to his words, and I don't. I don't like it at all.

"There's a lot of things I could've done differently," I say, thinking of my sister whom I haven't spoken to in five years and my parents, who I didn't visit enough while I had the chance. I think of every friend I've snubbed and every chance I didn't take. That one coworker who kept bringing her dog to work, despite the rules. I never said anything. No one did.

Sins big and small; it's a lot.

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“I don’t think of them as sins,” I say, grasping for words, “I think of them as missed chances. I always thought I'd have more time. To do better. To get it right.”

“We all did.”

“Do you think Callie was doomed from the moment the plant exploded?”

“I’m no scientist, no doctor,” he starts, “but yes. I do. I think it was bad, rotten luck that she was there. She’s a good dog and she didn’t deserve it, but it still happened to her. So now it’s hers to carry.”

Tears well up in my eyes. We’re talking about Callie. Just Callie. I swallow. But we survived this long – doesn’t that mean that there’s a chance?

Outside the car, there’s space between the buildings now and shrivelled up trees are taking their place. The fog makes it a bit difficult to see, and it’s raining ash again, but if I squint, it looks more like snow. Is it nearing Christmas? I think it should be. The explosion was so long ago… right? Even if everything remained the same and it looked like nothing really changed. It had, hadn’t it?

“Do you still want to go to the border?” His voice makes me jump in my seat.

“Yes,” I say, but it’s only a dry rasp and I have to try twice more before my assent is more than a croak. “Yes, please,” I add belatedly. “And thank you.”

“What for?”

“Taking me. Even though I have no money.”

He smiles at me. He looks sad. “You’ve paid enough.” He nods at Callie. “You and Callie both.”

Five minutes later he pulls up in front of a fence, one that didn’t use to circle the whole of Roskilde. It’s multilayered with barbed wire on top. Big signs litter the road in front of us and despite the fact they’re facing away from us I know exactly what they say: QUARANTINE. STAY OUT. DANGER. RADIATION.

A few meters after the signs, the fog swallows the road entirely.

I swallow. It’s very possible – probable, even – that whoever is on the other side of the fence won’t like me crossing over. It prickles. There seems to be a light further down, and I need to leave the car. Because it’s worth a shot, right? We’ve paid, Callie and me. We’ve paid. We were the first to die after all. Further suffering helps no one. We were at ground zero, no animals allowed, and still I said nothing when Callie was let in. I still… But you can’t punish a dog. And penance doesn’t matter with things that can’t be changed, things so colossally big

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that no amount of guilt will ever make up for it.

What's down that road? I open the door of the cab, thank the driver and get out. The air is hot. Callie pants next to me. The fog surrounds us and steals away everything the moment we enter it.

Maybe the only way out is through.

Fog closes around them, swallowing them up. Maybe this time they'll stay gone.

They forgot to close the door to the cab, but then, they always do. I get out, circle the car and close the door before returning to the driver's seat. Sometimes they manage to leave, once they get the chance. I like to think I help them go wherever they need to go, but sometimes it takes some doing before they're ready.

A new request for a ride ticks into the system and with one last look at the fog where the woman, Dr. Mortensen, and Callie, have disappeared, I drive away. They were at ground zero but you wouldn't know it, looking at them. I think she forgot that she used to work there and that's why. Sometimes she picks at the name tag on the front of her shirt like it bothers her but she never looks at it.

When I took the job, I wasn't expecting that I'd never get to leave it, but I guess that's the way of things. I didn't cause this, but I still got saddled with some of the responsibility, and until someone relieves me, I'm stuck as a ferryman for the dead. Saving the ones that can be saved, the only way I know how.

I leave Dr. Mortensen and Callie to their fate. Either I'll see them again, or I won't.

Dr. Mortensen steps out of the bushes with Callie right behind her. *Stop,* she mouths.

I stop.

"Hello, beautiful," I say to Callie who wags her tail at me, recognising me and accepting the treat I brought for her, just in case.

"You know Callie?" Dr. Mortensen stumbles closer. "Is she yours?"

I look back at Callie. "No," I say. "No, she's not."

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