

Apocalyptic Tears

“Save the Amazon,” read the cardboard sign. It drooped, self-conscious from the weight of the rain. “Trees Must Outlive THIS Generation,” another proclaimed. The lone figure among his cardboard walls huddled underneath a flickering streetlight.

Ennis Uldhir tapped the steering wheel, eyes flitting between the traffic light in front of him (green) and the boy next to the lamppost. Unbidden, his foot tapped the breaks. The car rolled to a stop next to the collection of signs. Next to the boy, out in the rain.

Ennis rolled down the window. Rain spat at his face, but he leaned out of the car anyways. “Hey. Bum.”

The boy’s eyes swung up, then away, dismissive.

Ducking back into the car, Ennis grabbed the coffee he’d driven nine minutes in the rain for. “Here,” he said, with the air of someone making a great sacrifice.

A flurry of emotions surfaced on the boy’s face, no doubt remembering all the warnings he’d been given as a kid—stranger danger and whatnot. Cold and caffeine won out, though, and he stepped forward, taking the paper mug.

This close, Ennis could see sleep pulling at his features, furious to be neglected. His hair was a black mop, his eyes creased with forgotten laughter. “Get in the car,” Ennis said. “Don’t you know it’s Burial Day? No one will see your signs, not today.”

The boy’s expression shifted, half anger and half unbidden relief. He hesitated, then moved to collect his signs.

Ennis scoffed. “Leave them. Those things aren’t coming in my car,” he declared, caressing the leather seat next to him.

He received a scathing look for his troubles, and a moment later several pounds of water-

laden cardboard settled into the backseat. The boy took the passenger seat.

Sighing, Ennis ran a hand through his hair. Goddamn philanthropy—now the seats were ruined. “At least tell me your name.”

“Ankell,” the boy said after a long pause. Out of the rain, he looked less likely to melt away at any second. The rain had made him smaller, Ennis realized.

“Ennis,” he replied. He looked back at the traffic light. It was green now; he drove.

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Ankell, Ennis learned, was eighteen. He was protesting the destruction of the rainforests, specifically the Amazon, to manufacture the Cure. And he'd been standing in the rain so long he'd forgotten that Sundays were Burial Days.

“Close the garage door,” Ennis called. “Set your signs out to dry, and for God’s sake dry off my car. Leave your shoes at the door.” He disappeared through said door, into his house. Ennis tossed his overcoat onto a chair, swearing under his breath. Why had he stopped? He had a rule against talking to people.

He huffed slightly, haphazardly discarding his shoes near the door. Coffee, he decided. He needed coffee. Of course, coffee was what had gotten him into this damn mess in the first place. All because he hadn't wanted to go through the trouble of fishing out new filters from the cupboard. And now he had to anyways. He stood on a chair and peered into the cabinets. Ankell followed the noise of slamming cabinets and exasperated grunts into a shockingly white kitchen, devoid of most signs of life save Ennis, standing on an upholstered chair in front of him.

Ennis frowned down at him. “Are you sure you're eighteen?”

“Excuse me?”

Ennis shrugged. “You look short, is all.”

“You're on a chair,” Ankell pointed out.

“Sound logic,” Ennis admitted, hopping down. On the ground, they were nearly eye to eye. “So why were you standing in the rain on a Burial Day? Don’t you have a funeral to go to?” Ankell’s lips twisted. “Only mine left.”

“Ah. Well, never fear. We’ll have coffee, as soon as I find the filters.”

“And of course, coffee is the solution to all of our problems.” Skepticism rang in his voice. Ennis shrugged. “Coffee is always the solution. I’m afraid mine comes from the Amazon, though.”

Ankell frowned, but shrugged, shoulders slumping in defeat. “My signs are in your garage, so I feel as though I’ve already made my point.” A laugh burst free, and Ennis looked embarrassed almost immediately. It was one thing to go buy coffee from the Espresso down the street, but laughter? Laughing was unheard of on a Burial Day. “Sorry,” he muttered under his breath. Ankell shrugged, dismissive again, but not of Ennis. “Laugh. Cry. They’re perilously close to one another, really.”

“I’m not mourning anyone,” Ennis said sharply. “Lucky you,” came the cool reply.

Ennis winced. This part of the Tubbs had been hard-hit by the disease that prompted apocalyptic predictions as far back as May. Some people called it the Plague; others referred to it as the Reaper. The only known cure, found in the Amazon Rainforest. Most of which was gone, now. He cleared his throat, ran a hand through his hair, and climbed back onto the chair.

Filters were discovered behind wine glasses, and coffee was made in silence.

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Sundays, Burial Days, became a routine. Pick up Ankell on the way back from an espresso run. Go home. Make more coffee. Repeat.

Funerals were ignored in favor of lounging on the couch, laughing and snacking. Ennis got roped into helping Ankell make new signs. They never discussed the Reaper looming on the horizon, which was a talent itself when the Amazon came up so often.

Still, Ennis learned that Ankell's mother had died in July. Ankell was convinced that the human race was ruining the Earth in a last-ditch attempt to eke out a few more miserable years. Ennis didn't mention the daily texts from his family, living in the south, safe by virtue of the dwindling Uldhir money, or about the syringe sitting on his dresser, the last one they could afford.

Ankell, for his part, didn't ask. He asked other things, though. He asked about the monogrammed chairs, the slowly deteriorating condition of the kitchen, with wine glasses piled high, the aggressively red car with seats that hadn't yet been replaced.

It was a nice feeling, Ennis decided, to argue over muscle cars and ignore impending doom.

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Three months later, Ankell wouldn't get in the car. Wouldn't even leave the lamppost.

Ennis got out of the car, leaving it idling in front of a green light. Ankell's face was buried in his knees. Crouching next to him, Ennis tapped his shoulder twice. "Let's go," he said impatiently. "Coffee's getting cold."

Ankell flinched away, then looked up, slowly. His eyes were red and glassy. His nose dripped blood. His fingers trembled. He held out a hand, palm up, silent and resigned. The veins running through his wrists were black. Tears ran down his face.

Ennis swore softly, beautifully. "The world is ending," he declared, talking to the sky. "Only mine," Ankell whispered back.

He grabbed Ankell's hand and pulled him to his feet. And then, abruptly: "Coffee's getting cold." Ankell got in the car. The signs were abandoned by the streetlight.

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The coffee was cold. Ennis dumped it and started over.

Ankell sighed. "Did you hear? The Amazon's all but dead. The Cure is gone." Ennis didn't reply.

"They've sold out of it," he continued, accepting the coffee.

If there was a hint of salt, if it was maybe a little more diluted than usual, they both pretended not to notice. There was a long pause.

Finally, Ankell spoke again. “Don’t come to my funeral.”

Ennis looked up. He’d been staring at the coffee, trying to divine the future through the blackness. “I won’t,” he said. Set down the glass and jogged upstairs.

He came back down with a syringe.

Hannah Lang
Rush-Henrietta Senior High School
Grade 11