

The Sixth Surface

Lizzy

"There has to be a way out".

We all said those silly words when we first got here. There had to be a way out, it was hope that kept us going then. Hope that we would see the sky and the clouds again. We remembered other things, but the clouds were in the front of my memory. I remembered a day when the sky was uniform and grey, and that was what the room was. The room was large, large enough for many children to survive, if not in comfort, then at least with enough space to play. It was flawless and perfect; the metal which made up five of its perfectly square surfaces was brushed in perfectly even strokes. They were all short and whorling, a maddeningly complex spiral in which we made games of finding shapes. We would lie on the floor and pretend we were out in the sun, Eddy said he could almost feel the sun on his face. What a memory to have! We found a dog first, Gram named it Ellen and said she had red hair; we didn't have any red for a while though, so Ellen remained grey and empty.

One day, Lizzy said that it was her birthday, and we searched and searched and eventually we found a cake in the walls. It was perfect and she smiled this great big grin that was all teeth and wide green eyes. We had plenty of brown to use for colour. The cake was chocolate. We didn't eat it. We found dozens of shapes in the walls, but no one dared to touch the sixth surface. We all agreed without saying that we shouldn't look at that wall, and we stuck by our word. In the beginning, all we had was our word. We didn't know each other back then, it was just me and the other six. The first day was the worst I think, everyone cried and moaned and whined for their families. I didn't remember my family though, and I thought it sounded like it was far too much trouble. We didn't need other grown ups, I remember I said that, we had each other and we could stick together and after all what choice did we have?

Jims agreed, he was always so easy to please, and after he did it was easy to turn the others around. I think Timmy just agreed because he realized how easy we all were. It only took him a few days to start poking us. I don't miss him much. He never found anything in the walls, he just made things sharp. Kat was brilliant at finding things though, and one day she found a mother in the spirals, and we stopped looking for shapes after that. The mother was stern and she didn't like us drawing

on the walls. To us, the metal walls were like the clouds which we almost could remember. Days were spent trying to remember the smell of the ocean, the taste of a candy bar. Jims told us once that he remembered what chocolate tasted like. Timmy beat him for the memory. He said he did it because it was unfair, that if he couldn't share the memory then he shouldn't have it. I think that if Timmy had remembered chocolate instead of Jims, he would have smacked his lips like a toad guarding treasure and never let us in on it. Tim liked to hurt people.

Timmy hurt Lizzy once and said it was what he remembered doing sometimes back before. We all remembered something from before, but only Timmy remembered that. Lizzy was quiet after that. I miss her. We never saw her smile big with all teeth and green eyes. Not again. She just sat in the corner which would be the place of so many and would never eat the food which the sixth surface gave us. And then, one night, she was gone. Bells rang. The sixth surface took her while we slept; she was the first to go. We didn't know people got to leave, the smell stayed for a long time after she left. It cut through the stench of life we had adapted to and reminded us of the dark we had forgotten. We knew to wake up if we heard the sound of bells after that. Bells sometimes were dreams, but sometimes it was someone else leaving me. No one else saw Lizzy leave, but I did.

I saw what she did. And I won't tell you because I hate you, so there.

Eddy

After Lizzy left Timmy had to find someone else to torment. He broke one of our water bottles and used it to poke us if he got bored. Timmy was bored a lot and he would watch with his mouth open as the glass gripped our pale skin and slowly stretched, ached, and ripped like canvas. He liked it when it ripped because of the red that came out. He was calm while it happened, and so we let him do it. A moment that Timmy was calm was a moment that the rest of us were safe. It was better our skin be red than purple and black. Eddy knew better than any of us that Timmy was sick and I don't blame him for trying to talk to him. He was tall and dark and knew how to touch someone and make them happy. He tried to help Timmy, and they talked for a long time. Timmy would scream and howl but Eddy would just smile and hug him and we were all amazed. That night Eddy was still with Timmy and lay down with him as we went to sleep. I was awake though, and because I am so clever, no one saw me. I saw

the two of them and what they did, and I knew that Timmy was happy and so was Eddy and what was the point of anything if it didn't make people happy?

Timmy was nice for a bit after that, he and Eddy were together a lot and they kissed sometimes. I never really understood kissing, even before. It seemed like a good way to get sick, but I knew that not everyone thought that way and that was fine too sometimes. Eddy kept Timmy happy and so we got to enjoy life a little bit more. We played games then, and we each hugged Eddy and sometimes he would visit us at night, the boys and the girls. Eddy was nice, like a brother to us. When we would sleep he would tuck us into our grey blankets and kiss us to keep us safe. He never came to me though, and I was sad to be left out. I saw him and Kat together once, and she was happy and loud and she woke us all up. Timmy was mad then and Eddy and he had an argument.

At the end of it Timmy hit Eddy in a bad place with the bottle. We didn't play any games after that. He was taken soon afterward and he staggered into the sixth surface even though we held him back. He was crying as he left but he shuffled and stumbled and fell into it anyway. It was calling him home. And then a word appeared on the sixth surface. It was the first time we all saw that the surface gave us a word along with the bad

smell. No one knew the word, but I knew. I knew each of the six words and I said Eddy's when his time came.

Pedophile.

Kat

We forgot Eddy after a while but Kat couldn't forget. She refused to forget and I was mad at her for making me remember. Kat was sad that he was gone. We all were sad but Kat kept Eddy alive in her words and her searching. Her endless searching! When there was five of us things got more active. "There has to be a way out" became something that was whispered more than once. I didn't like it. They were my friends and they should stay here with me until their time came. That was life, wasn't it? A room, fun for a time and a final exit into the unknown.

But Kat disagreed. Kat looked at the sixth surface as a challenge. Her fingers remembered each crevice. She had clever, nasty fingers and she looked in the walls for irregularity. "There's always an escape." She said to me once, "We got here somehow, and we can get out the same way." It didn't feel right when she said it to me, but she kept looking. I tried to stop her and told her that bad things would happen if she kept looking. She didn't listen to me and Timmy just made it worse.

He told her that Eddy was just on the other side of that surface and wouldn't it be great to see him again. Timmy was mean, he knew that Eddy was gone, and we knew what that smell meant, but he just wanted to watch Kat move around and make noise.

Gram started picking out clean water bottles around then, it was just us, after all, and there was all the water and food that Kat wasn't eating. She stopped eating because she searched all the time and Kat's food either went bad or to Davey who liked to take. Kat slept sometimes, but not when we did, and when she did we all watched her for fun. She tossed and turned and said names that we didn't know. Grown up names like James and Darling. She didn't remember those names when she woke, so I wasn't mad at her. We all had lives before this, but each time she slept I hoped that she would forget it and forget trying to escape.

Kat thought she had found an escape once, a way out. It was a circle that was barely there, right in Mother's breast. When Kat told us about it everyone was sad, because even if there was a way out through Mom's chest, we couldn't ever use it. It wouldn't be nice to touch Mom there, and she couldn't give us permission, being trapped inside the whorls of steel. I was proud to have decided that, it was logical and made sense and Jims agreed with me and that was that. Kat tried to argue but

Timmy looked at her wrong and she backed off into the corner. Kat wasted away after that; she stared at the circle until she had to go. When the time came she didn't look at me. The ground distracted her and she crawled like a mouse out through the sixth surface. A scared, tiny mouse that smells cheese. I drew a mouse using yellow that I found in Gram's arm, he didn't mind. Kat's word was "larceny", which is a fancy word for thief. I thought everything would be fine after she left. I thought we had found peace.

Timmy

Kat stole our peace. Nobody forgot Kat, and everyone who was left started to be afraid of the bells. They started looking for ways out too. People would stare at Mother's chest and say "After all, it's only a drawing isn't it?" And then Mother would stare at them and they would shrink back and punish themselves for thinking such a thing. There was a pile of ground glass in the corner which we used sometimes for punishments. Glass lasted. We always had fresh bottles of water to drink, and when the glass was emptied we used it for all sorts of things. Usually it was where we went. We didn't think of it at first though, when there were seven of us we didn't know. There are still yellows and browns and greens on the walls from back then,

colors describing the pitiful universes inside our bodies. When there were less of us the bottles got used in every way, once we made music. Gram led us in our playing. He had a knack for it and Timmy was jealous.

Timmy couldn't play music. He was fat and stupid and Gram was skinny like a rope; the wind just blew through him like he was barely there. Once we started playing Gram was never without his bottle, blowing over it like he wanted to give it a kiss but had forgotten how. They stopped looking for a way out while Gram was blowing, and it was nice. Just the deep and hollow whispers of the bottle which Gram knew so well. They all sat in a circle and Gram stood in the middle and played and we would follow on our own bottles. They would cry after playing, although I don't know why. I liked Gram very much. He was a wonderful helper.

When Gram was leaving us Timmy got really mad. He screamed and shouted at the sixth surface and at me. He cried and bellowed and tore at his hair but all the same he cowered from the sixth surface. It would never call to him, he knew that his word was something that no one should ever say and so he would be in the room forever. He threw bottles all over, and their smell overcame even the bad smell from the sixth surface. He threw bottles at Gram, clean ones, our music bottles. We got angry at Timmy then.

When Gram was stepping through the sixth surface and his word "Alcoholism" was said, we started poking Timmy with the bottle shards. I got him in the ear and he screamed low and hollow like a bottle-secret. He cried and begged and was alone in the end. When he stopped being angry he was just a sad, fat, monster who has lost his claws. And nothing is sadder than a monster without his claws, because without those, what point is there to a monster? When Timmy stopped moving we thought we were safe. He never went through the sixth surface. I know his word but I never said it. He's still here, in the corner with the bad-bottles, smelling and leaking and wasting. Psychopath.

Jims

In the end it was just Jims, Timmy's smell, the broken bottles, mother, and me. We had very little to talk about apart from the room. Jims filled in his dog finally and made it red as rust and called it Lizzy because he missed her. There was another, smaller dog next to Lizzy that we called Kat and that

dog was never filled in. We piled the bad bottles in the corner with Timmy's smell and ate our flavorless sacrament in abundance. We drank water like it was wine and Jims started to remember. He would talk to me about his life before the room, and that made me unhappy. He talked to me about a wife and children and a home. He told me about Christmas dinner with his family and how wonderful it had been that even though he had burnt the turkey his wife loved it all the same. He told me about puddings and cakes and tarts and about the world. He told me that there were metal boxes full of people that flew through the stars, and that there were so many of us outside that even this room was spacious. His family had been wealthy and had "gotten the first ship out of that hell hole". They left their home for another one in the stars, but there was no room for liars in their new home. No room for a lot of things.

We sat and he talked and I listened. I learned about the world which I could no longer remember. All I knew was the brushed steel and the sixth surface and the glass bottles which had clean, pure water in them and the bad bottles which did not. My life was the room, and that room was my life. There were seven of us in the beginning and then they started to leave because their time was up with me. With me. With me.

Me.

"Jims?"

"Stop calling me that,"

"Sorry, James, I know you don't like that. It hurts you, doesn't it?"

"You know it does."

"I'm sorry, James."

We sit in silence for a long time and it is like every other silence. There is the waiting, and the sitting. Sometimes Jims will pace and look at Mother and reach out a hand. He does this now and rests his hand on Mother's breast. I make a sound. Jims jumps and is scared to look at me. I like Jims, he is always so easy to use.

"James?"

"What is it?"

"I know things James, things that you told me, things about everyone else."

"I know, you creepy bastard, I know. We've been here for months and you barely say a word, you just... god, you're just watching. You know this goddam place better than any of us, you probably know why we're like this."

"I do."

"Why we're..." He stops, and hugs his thin, starved, child's body.

"Young again. You know there were people who longed for paradise. Eternal life, Jims. Well, I couldn't give it to just anyone. We couldn't."

"I know, I... I found it, god help me. I found what's beyond and I stared back at it as each of my men went in and never came out. I could hear them though, damn it, I could hear them!"

He cradles his head in his hands and cries big, wet tears.

"They sounded happy. God help me, they were so happy and I just couldn't wait to join them."

"But you did Jims, you waited so long. And then..."

My head hurts. Jims looks at me and cringes.

"You don't know..." He laughs and it hurts my swollen head, the smells of the room start to rot in my nostrils. The room closes in on me and its whorls become faces which snarl and gnash, those faces become other faces which are less human and even angrier. Mother is angry and I can see the walls closing in and I cannot stop it. I want to stop it. I want to end it. I want it all to go away. I finally see the room and I can see the stench that months of waste and decay have left behind. I can see Lizzy's pain etched into the walls. I long for Eddy's love that

he will never give to me. I can see the millions of maggots which were carried in on Timmy's disgusting body. These bodies which contaminated my perfect world. They were here to be cleansed and punished but they were filthy, nasty, and worst of all, terribly human. They crawl into my skull and make me forget and I cry big, wet tears.

"Mama!" I scream, spiking pain streaking through my head.

I feel a body around my own. I open my eyes and the pain leaves me. Jims is holding me and is crying with me, we both see the world and want it to be better than it is. We both went about it so wrong. We stretched beyond the possible and came back holding maggots and called them diamonds.

"I'm sorry," He says, "I never wanted this. I saw heaven here and I needed a custodian. We were going to change the world, Peter, don't you remember?"

The name stirs something heavy and vile inside me. Peter.

"Peter." Peter.

"Peter."

"Oh, no, oh god no, please. Just let me out, Peter, I know you can. Just press right there and it will end. Right there, don't you see it! Only you can do it though. Peter please! Liz, I never wanted you to... please forgive me."

The sixth surface calls to him, its name clear on its glorious face. The face of god etched in nothingness.

"Pride." We say together.

"Don't I know it." He says, and he begins to walk through the surface.

"Bye Jims." I say as he leaves, and the surface closes and I am left alone.

Peter

Time has passed. I have no idea how long and I don't really care. The walls keep me company and the walls never change. Lizzy and Kat eye Timmy's bones hungrily, but it has been so long since I have had meat that I cannot resist. The parasites force themselves into my mouth, throat, and stomach, and I feel them becoming a part of my whole. They know me so well. I stare at Mother a lot lately. I cannot stop after what I heard Jims say to me. I see the button now, it looks like my hand, carved

into the walls. I cannot press it though, my arms scream with the effort but my mind will not allow it. The room is not done with me yet. I do not deserve Mother's embrace.

Alone, I begin to stare at the sixth surface which robbed me of all of my friends. I begin to remember, slowly, as my ageless body becomes sick then well again. I was Peter, a man who went into the sky with the first. The world was fire when we left, fire that could only scour the planet raw. We fled and in our arrogance we found something beautiful. A world of oasis, paradise. There was food and water plenty, it was a garden which was ripe and ready for us. But James was uncertain that we deserved the second chance which seemed to have been presented to us. He remembered the fires and the hate which had been brought upon the world because of race, creed, and love. He wanted this new world to be free of all sin.

James wanted a true garden, and so, he called me. I was a philosopher, a jailer, and most importantly, free. I was free of all emotion, lauded as the perfect judge. I was sick and could never tell why, and so I was put to work instead of put to death. I was tasked with building this room, a waystation into Eden. I would allow none in who were not worthy, I would only let pass the finest and most pure. The room took all that was underneath and made it plain. James was the first to use the

room, then a musician named Gram, James' wife, their daughter, a school teacher, and a priest. I was the last of the seven, the first voyage into heaven's gates. I was the perfect guardian. I was perfect. But they were not.

I feel the sixth surface more than I see it, and when it calls to me I barely think before I am there myself. My word is "Perfect" and I feel it as I enter into darkness.

I hear moans and the ripping of flesh as the bad smell fills my nostrils. The parasites inside me attempt to crawl to the surface so they can find a better host. This is not Heaven. I made no gateway there. None were worthy of this new world, and so in its stead, I constructed the perfect punishment. They all are in cages, their bodies perfect and undying. Hooks tear at their bodies and feed the loose bits to the others. It is a perfect circle and the smell is bad and exquisite. It creeps into my mind and as I am taken into my own cage I begin to howl and sob. This is my heaven. My friends scream in welcome.

I am home.