

The Junction: A Short Story

By Justine Spencer

THE ARRIVAL

Marnie

Finally, there was more than mirage on the horizon. There was more than red sand. There was more than shrubs. For the first time in weeks, there were actual buildings alongside the road. Rusted and ruined, remnants of the past. But they were there, still standing strong.

“Can you see it Garrick?”

“Hmm?” His head jolts to attention.

“There’s a building up ahead. See?” I point in its direction, near the pile of tractor tires and looming gum trees.

I want to quicken my pace, but Garrick throws his arm across my body.

“Use some caution. Do you remember anything the Navy taught you?” He snaps.

“Of course I remember, but — ”

He shakes his head. “No buts. I don’t want a repeat of last time.”

“You still think I’m a liability after what happened to Rob?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t need to.”

He runs his hands over his face, his expression frustrated. I’ve seen it many times during our deployments. “All I’m saying is we need to be careful. It’s worth taking a chance on this place, but we can’t race into it like it’s the opening day of the Royal Show.”

I don’t bother trying to have the last say. If I tried, we’d be here from dusk to dawn arguing. Instead I let him feel like he’s in control as we walk closer to the

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building. We pass by several signs, their messages faded after so many years under the sun.

Without warning, a horn blows, sounding as if it's coming from the building. In the distance there are frantic voices, although the strong breeze muffles what they're saying.

"We're not alone." Garrick throws his arm across me again, forcing me to go back.

"Well, we're not leaving. We've been walking for weeks. They know we're here. We can't outrun them if they choose to chase us."

Running up the street are about five figures, all dressed in darks from head to toe.

"Shit." After seeing some of the figures carrying guns, Garrick reaches for his.

"Christ, put it away. Don't give them a reason to fire first."

"Well what do you suppose we do?"

"Just give me a second to think."

"For fuck's sake," he spits. "We don't have a second anymore Marnie. We have two options now: kill, or be killed."

Jeff

“Roamers are on the horizon,” Tony says, barging into my caravan. After hearing the horn about five minutes ago, I expected him to be here sooner.

“How many?”

“At least two.”

“Which side?”

“The west entry, near the old petrol station.”

“And everyone’s been cleared off the street?”

“Yes.”

“Alright.”

I grab my shotgun from behind my drawers and wedge it in my belt before stuffing my pockets with extra bullets. Hanging near my door are my scarf and goggles. I wrap the knitted wool around my face, making sure it covers my neck, mouth and nose, before slapping my goggles on. The sand whips fiercely out there, and it’s the last distraction you need when roamers intrude.

Usually this time of day Pimblee Road is busy with children kicking the footy or playing in the sand during their lunch break. But no one’s walking the streets, not after our defenders released a roamers warning and ordered everyone to their designated caravans and homes. While the streets are empty, you can sense the eyes staring out of every window.

“Have we got defenders positioned at the other entries?” I ask Tony.

“Yep, we have five near the station and then two at every other entry.”

We reach the intersection with Carnrvon-Mullewa Road and head west towards the station. Not that we ever use it for fuel anymore. Because it’s on the edge of the junction, its only use is to serve as a watch post. If we use it for anything

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else, there's a good chance it'll get looted by roamers or the Crossers. The only time the station's has any other use was about eight years ago, when Daisy stumbled off the road and gave birth to her son, Louis. It's where she gave life, but it also happens to be where she lost her own.

Up ahead, our defenders stand side-by-side acting as a human wall. Half of them have their guns cocked, while the rest hold cricket bats, towbars and tools from a fireplace set we've recently scavenged. Across the red sand and wild shrubs the two roamers approach closer and closer to our home.

"They've stopped," one of the defenders observes. Tony grabs his binoculars.

"A male and female," Tony confirms. "They're rummaging through the woman's bag."

We wait. For a bullet, a grenade, for something that might end our lives. It's hard not to expect the worst during times like these. But before we know it, an arm shoots up into the air. In its hand, a white shirt waves in the wind.

Marnie

A clan. That's what we've stumbled across. Or so Jeff tells us. A collection of survivors who are trying to make the most of what's left in our world, he says. I want to believe it straight away, but Garrick's cautions echo in my head.

Jeff walks us down the main street while two men carrying guns walk behind us. Seeing as there are no functioning cars here, the bitumen is completely covered in red sand. In between houses, the empty lots are swarmed with caravans and tents. Some even call the empty, rusted shell of a car home. Ropes are fixed between every structure. What I presume are solar lights hang from the rope, otherwise it's pegged with sheets and clothes that flutter in the breeze.

"How many of you are there?" I ask.

"As of last week, 143" Jeff replies. "We try to do a monthly census to keep on top of population growth and sustainable supplies."

As we walk down the street, I can sense eyes on me. People I don't know, people that may want to rape me, kill me, or eat me. There's really no knowing for sure yet. But really, is there ever a way of truly knowing? I suspect our ancestors thought they knew. Thought humanity would never come to this. Yet here we are, suffering from their decisions.

Jeff leads us to a caravan and halts out the front.

"I'm sure you have questions, just as I do. However it's clear you're suffering from your travels. Have a sleep. We can spare some food and water for you. Once you've recovered, we'll talk."

"How long are we allowed here?" Garrick asks.

"That depends on what the two of you want. And not just for the short term, but for the future too. Not a lot of survivors think that far ahead — they don't see a

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reason to — but I suggest the both of you take the time to do so. Meanwhile, rest up. I'll have two of our defenders on guard — for your safety and ours.”

* * *

I can't remember the last time I had a comfortable sleep. After resting in the bunk, it feels like years. The sleep was the kind you had as a child: blissful, cozy, safe. It's bizarre waking up to normal circumstances. There's an itchy blanket keeping me warm and a lumpy pillow under my head. A cold pool of drool saturates the pillow and sticks to my cheek. I've learned to see this as a sign of good rest. The morning sun sneaks through the blinds, rather than gushing at you at first light. I roll over, curious as to why Garrick's snoring didn't wake me. Lying across his bunk, his fingers are clasped together and rest over his chest, but his eyes are wide open.

“Did you sleep at all?”

“I was on watch.”

“What for? They're a clan, not a pack of dingoes.”

“They could be a clan of cannibals.”

“If they are, they would've killed us first thing. Still, if you're that insistent on watches, we could've taken turns.”

One of the men — a 'defender' I think Jeff called them — comes in carrying a tray. He places it on the caravan's small dining table, before leaving without a word. There are two pieces of bread, two museli bars, two bottles of water and a can of peaches. I rush over, tearing off chunks of bread, savouring them on my tongue and soaking up the starch flavor. By the time I chew, it's soggy with saliva.

“Are you coming to eat?” I ask in between mouthfuls.

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“In a second.”

“We don’t have a second anymore, Marnie.” I mimic his voice from earlier.

“We have two options now: kill, or be killed.”

“Fuck off.”

I smirk. It’s riveting getting under his skin. He can do it so easily to others, so it’s satisfying giving him a dose of his own medicine.

“So, what do you think?” I ask as he rolls out of his bunk.

“About what?”

“About the clan.”

“Don’t know,” he says, chomping on a mouthful of muesli bar.

“What do you mean you don’t know? You seem to know everything.”

“They seem fine.”

“Do you think we can trust them?”

“They haven’t given us a reason not to.”

“It’d be nice to have a place to call home again.” I slurp the peach syrup.

“Don’t get too comfortable, they haven’t accepted us yet. Like the old man said — ”

“Jeff. His name is Jeff.”

“Whatever, Jeff. Like he said, it depends on what we want.”

“It’s pretty easy to know what I want. I want this. I want to be a part of something again. Don’t you?”

He shrugs his broad shoulders. “Yair, I suppose.”

Jeff

After a solid sleep and a decent feed, Marnie and Garrick no longer look as if they are about to drop dead at any second. Marnie straightens up and smiles the moment I walk into the caravan. Garrick, on the other hand, remains lying in his bunk, not even bothering to lift his head.

“Morning,” I say as I slide into the booth. “I trust you’re feeling better than yesterday.”

“Much better,” Marnie says.

“Sorry we couldn’t offer more food. We’re under tight rations at the moment.”

“It was more than plenty. The most we’ve eaten in months.”

“I’m glad. It makes the discussions we need to have a lot easier. Garrick, do you mind joining us?”

Without a word he rolls off his bunk and sits next to Marnie, who’s opposite me in the booth.

“So, how did you find yourselves here?”

It’s Marnie who does most of the explaining, but Garrick pipes up when he necessary. While he has grown up in the west most of his life, Marnie and her brother, Rob, were born in Cairns before they flew to Victoria and joined the Navy’s recruit school. All three of them met at HMAS Stirling, the west’s fleet base down in Rockingham. Until the Thirst hit, that’s what was home.

“Have you heard from your parents, Marnie? Do you know if the Thirst has reached that far?”

She shakes her head. “Even before we left base, the phones were down. Last time we spoke was about three weeks before we left.”

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They were one of the last to flee the base. While Marnie and Rob were more than prepared to leave, it was Garrick who took some convincing. His partner, Cassidy, was on deployment when the Thirst hit, and he didn't want to leave without her.

"Were either of you ever deployed?"

Marnie chuckles. "We were at sea more than we were on land. Of course, the one time we're not deployed, the world turns to shit."

"I guess things happen for a reason, even if we don't understand why."

"I suppose."

"So, what happened when you fled base?"

She tells me they didn't really have a plan. They had her car, a worn but loyal Jeep, and bags carrying the essentials but no real direction. They were reluctant to escape further south, despite the likelihood of rain and better crops. The south is where they assumed most people would travel to and they wanted to avoid chaos. It wasn't until Garrick mentioned his grandparent's holiday home in Green Head that they had a reason to travel up north.

"Green Head?" I repeat. "Never heard of the place."

"Just south of Leeman," Garrick says. "It's an old crayfishing town."

"Did you make it there?"

Marnie shakes her head. "Because we were taking the roads further inland we ran out of fuel quicker than we expected. The Jeep barely made it past Wanneroo."

"Okay, so the car was left behind, but more importantly, where's your brother?" I ask.

Marnie stoops, her gaze falling to her lap. "Umm ... He's, um — "

"He's dead," Garrick finishes. "Eaten by cannibals."

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“Were they Narvs?”

“Were they what?” he asks.

“Narvs. It’s what we call the cannibals from Carnarvon.”

“No. No the ones that killed Rob were further south. Although we came across the ones in Carnarvon too.”

“I’m sorry. The cannibals have taken some of our own too.”

Marnie shrugs. A few tears have rolled down her cheeks, leaving streaks that shine. “Not much we can do about it now,” she says. “Can only look ahead and move forward.”

“Speaking of which, what do you hope lies ahead in the future?”

“Other than the world returning to the way it was?” Marnie says with a soft smile. “I just want to be a part of something again. While the Navy would shit me off, I liked being a part of the crew. I liked spending every day working with other people for something greater than we were.”

I give her a quick smile before turning to Garrick. “How about you? What do you want for your future?”

He folds his arms across his chest, slumping even further into the booth. “I want Cass. I want the life I was supposed to have with her.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?” he scoffs.

“Yes, I do. It’s hard to remember, all of us have lost someone we wish was spared. I lost my Sarah. I lost our Bella and Todd. I lost the future we were going to share together.”

“You had more time with them than I had with Cass.”

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“That might be true. But all the time in the world with the ones we love would never be enough. Even if you had an extra day, near the end you’d wish it were a week, then a month, then a year.”

He sits across from me, still avoiding my gaze, but I take his silence as understanding.

“Marnie’s right,” I continue. “There’s nothing any of us can do but move forward. I really hope you find the future you need, Garrick, and I hope it includes us.”

Three Months Later

Marnie

As the scavengers and I walk down Carnarvon-Mullewa Road, the cloudless blue sky deepens to purple, dashed with hues of pink and orange. While we're arriving home later than expected, I enjoy wandering the roads this time of day. The shrubs don't look like shrivelled up skeletons and the sunset softens the harsh red sand. For an hour or so, the world feels gentle again. But I know reality will sink in when darkness comes.

We smell the smoke before we notice the grey trail into the sky. My heart pounds at the sight. Has the clan has been ambushed during our trip? Teddy laughs, reassuring me that there'd be more smoulder if we'd been attacked. He tells me the smoke would be from the cooking pit. Probably found a wild dingo raiding the stocks. Can't let good meat go to waste, he says.

The Junction is a different town in the evening. Pimblee Road buzzes with energy as the whole clan comes together. Children play tag in between the caravans and tents, while the adults enjoy a chat after a hard days work. Around the cooking pit, a couple of the builders have their guitars out, while Old Man Blue plays the harmonica.

I keep an eye out for Garrick, but I assume he's on watch. Jeff thought his skills from the Navy would be best used in the defence industry, while I was happy to opt for something new, like scavenging.

Ruth and I separate from the scavengers to give Jeff a run down of my progress. He stands near the stock room holding a tin of beans with one hand and a cigarette in the other. He straightens up when he sees us, his eyes solemn.

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“I hope the trip went well,” he says.

“Same old,” Ruth says. “Marnie fit right in.”

“Glad to hear. You can debrief me later.” Jeff runs his tongue along his teeth.

“Marnie, do you mind if we have a chat?”

“Yeah, of course,” I say.

“You did good kid,” Ruth pats my shoulder and smiles before leaving.

“It’s best if we go inside,” Jeff says, steering me into the stock room.

He places his beans on the table before leaning up against the wall, ciggie in his mouth.

“There’s no easy way to say this.” He rubs the back of his neck.

“Then just say it.”

“Okay,” he removes the ciggie and takes a deep breath and looks me dead in the eyes. “Garrick’s gone.”

“Gone?” I feel weightless. “Gone where?”

“I don’t know. Nobody does. He left during night watch.”

My cheeks dampen, but I resist wiping them dry.

“I’m sorry, Marnie. I shouldn’t have allocated him to defence. He wasn’t ready.”

I sit on the table to compose myself. Jeff’s beans and spoon clang against the tiles.

“I understand if you want to leave —”

I put my hand up to stop him.

“I’m not leaving. That idiot can keep chasing the past if he wants. But I’m staying here.”

THE JUNCTION

Jeff

Engaging in the weekly committee meetings was always Sarah's thing. It was never mine. Whether it was Bella's dance academy, Todd's soccer club, the school's P&C, her book club or the ladies' monthly poker night, Sarah organised it all. Her contribution could always be counted on, no matter if it was a school fair, chocolate fundraising, canteen duty or simply offering our dining room for meetings. The most I've ever done was bring the oranges that she cut up for Todd's last grand final. Yet somehow, I'm the one leading the clan and conducting the monthly meeting.

Metal legs scratch against the floor as I drag the aged desks and chairs to form a circle. Pinned to the classroom's walls are the new alphabet and numeracy posters that the scavengers collected on their most recent trip. Like the classrooms I grew up in, a blackboard sits at the front with Jenny's meticulous writing from today's class. We didn't always have a board to teach on. It's only been a luxury in the last year, ever since we looted it from an abandoned Geraldton school. It extended the scavenging trip by a few weeks — and also made our scavs more vulnerable to being attacked — but the board has proven its value time and time again. On a daily basis it teaches our children. But tonight it holds more significance than usual. Tonight it's collecting ideas that will shape our future.

As the sun begins to set it illuminates through the tarps covering our broken windows and decorates the other wall with silhouettes. In the distance the bell chimes outside the stock room, signaling the end of supper and the survival of

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another day. At its sound, everyone — apart from representatives on council night — returns to their designated caravans for the remainder of the evening.

First to hang up their goggles and scarves are Lionel Lewis and his wife, Ruth. They're the only pairing where both partners hold a seat on the council, with Lionel representing education and Ruth speaking for the scav. Many assume they hold substantial power with their positions, but they're often the quietest during meetings, along with our leading stock taker, Odette. The Lewis' are unusual in that they're not forceful with their opinions. When the time comes for their say, their views aren't limited to their family, it extends to the broader community. With the Lewis', it's not what's best for the family, it's about what's best for the clan.

"Amazes me how you two are always the first to rock up," I say. "Don't you have kids to look after?"

"Jack walked Eliza home and Ash offered to monitor Mae," Ruth says. "It gets easier now that they're older."

"Jack's almost finishing school, isn't he?"

"A couple of months left," Lionel confirms.

"Any ideas on what he wants to do after?"

"I'm not around much to ask him, but if he is considering something, he hasn't told us," says Ruth.

I wipe the chalk off the board. The fine dust floats into the air, irritating my eyes and nose.

"He's not inclined to scavenge?"

"Definitely not," Ruth scoffs.

Their eldest and only son, Jack, was the first child in our clan. There were five of us when the Lewis' arrived. At the time, nobody had a fixed role the way we do

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now. It was simple; we woke up, evaluated what we needed to do for the day, and did it. It was probably the addition of Lionel's ability to teach and Ruth's understanding of the land that encouraged us to live more rationally. We all had skills from our past lives that we could offer to each other. The trick was to find an efficient structure that worked for all.

Just like when the Lewis' arrived, Jack's entry into adulthood has prompted a new phase in our clan's maturity. The decisions he's about to make are far more difficult than the ones I made at his age. Whereas I was overwhelmed by what life offered me, Jack's options are limited. Due to his youth, he has four industries to choose from; construction, defence, medicine or scavenging. Compare that to when university faculties had over thirty courses to choose from back in my day.

It's not just the lack of diversity that makes it difficult for him. A lack of drive would also contribute. Compared to my generation, he hasn't grown up in an environment where you can easily draw inspiration from your surroundings. For those of us who lived before the Thirst, we had experiences we could base our future decisions on. His parents' decisions to become a teacher and scavenger were easily made, as they'd developed those skills in their past. It's the same for Marnie. Somehow this sailor made her way up from Rockingham. Her preexisting military skills made her a perfect candidate to scavenge.

A positive to take from Jack's transition, is that it could lead us to developing new industries. The timing couldn't have been more perfect either. Our initial challenge to survive the Thirst and its aftermath has come to an end. Now it's time to chose who we want to become and work towards it.

"See what comes out of tonight's council," I tell them. "Maybe you can throw a few ideas his way."

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Our secretary, Ellis, is next to arrive before other councilors arrive. Odette obediently finds a seat while Dr Rubert, our medicine representative, admires some of the new encyclopedias the scavengers found on their recent trip. Our new defence representative, Pip, rushes in babbling apologies. Apparently one of the officers was unaware they were on night patrol and she had to sort it out. With a majority of us here, Ellis begins to distribute blank sheets of paper and lead.

Typically, Yarren is last to arrive. Despite the time of night, he's still beaming from ear to ear. He manages any construction, restoration and maintenance that's necessary within the town. With the amount of grey paint that's plastered on his arms and face, I'd say they were repainting one of the houses on Gregory Street.

"G'day chief," he says, plomping into a chair.

With everyone present, I begin the proceedings, knowing I'll never perfect it to Sarah's standard.

"Thanks for coming. Before we begin, I feel compelled to make you all aware that tonight's meeting has a greater objective than normal, and as a result, we'll proceed differently. Rather than simply considering the aims of each individual industry, I want us to focus our attention to our broader ambitions, the ones we can only achieve as a cohesive unit."

Several members furrow their brows. While no one speaks up about the change, I'm anticipating their unease as the meeting continues.

"As per usual we'll hear from our secretary, Ellis, for a general consensus on the clan's progress before representatives give us an update on their industry. Prior to the meeting's conclusion, we'll discuss what we want to achieve as a community and explore potential projects we can undertake to reach our goals."

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To my left, Ellis begins his run down of the past month. Several days ago we celebrated the birth of our latest member, Paige. Also welcoming into our world were two roamers, who've proven to be resourceful with their outside knowledge. They informed us that a new community has established themselves further south, a group predominantly focused on petrol, motors and cars. Unfortunately on our most recent loot, we lost a scav who was attacked by wild dogs after he decided to venture off during the night. He was a recent recruit, not entirely accustomed to our systems, but nonetheless a saddening loss. Overall, our population is just under the 200 mark.

Odette is the first representative to speak and pulls out a folded piece of lined paper from her shirt pocket.

“Over the past year our stock levels have declined more and more, and this month is no different. With at least three new roamers each month, essential supplies like clothes, goggles, boots and bottles are lower than ever before. The haul of towels and linen Ruth provided last scavenge has helped tremendously. However with our birth rates increasing and water restrictions still in place, we have no efficient way of washing and reusing these goods — ”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Dr. Rubert says, “but this is probably a suitable time to inform you this this issue will only worsen. We're expecting another four births in the next year.”

“If we can grab a few more scavs, I'm sure we can help out somehow,” Ruth says, biting her lip. “Can take a trip to the beach and wash them there.”

“No wonder our stocks are low,” Yarren intrudes. “Your job's to loot and grab what we need. Stop wasting our time.”

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“Coming from you,” Dr. Rubert scoffs. “You’ve spent this whole week painting houses. What bloody use is that to us?”

“Enough.” I slam my hand on the desk, disturbing the dust and sand. “There’s one thing I haven’t allowed — and will not allow — and that’s time wasting. From where I sit, Ruth is certainly not wasting her time scavenging, and Yarren is not wasting his time painting.”

Yarren retreats, folding his tattooed arms across his chest while Dr. Rubert avoids my stare.

“Now, in regards to Ruth’s offer,” I continue, “I think it’s a temporary solution we should act on. For the next few months, if the scavengers can include washing into their routine, it will take some pressure off our stock keepers and medics. Yarren, if you could offer two of your tradesmen it would be gladly appreciated.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am. And I’m seriously questioning your role as construction’s representative. If you don’t pull your head in and start focusing on what’s best for everyone, I will reconsider your role.”

Around the room, everyone’s sunken into their chairs, staring at the paper on their desks.

“Odette, please continue with your update,” I say while writing down key points from the meeting’s tangent. My writing’s barely legible, so it’ll be interesting if I can recall them later on.

“The biggest concern in our stock shortage is food. We’ve relied on canned and processed foods from past production. It’s pretty obvious that we can’t expect every scavenging trip to bring back a hefty food supply, yet that’s what we’ve been doing; holding the same unrealistic expectations.”

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Odette takes a deep breath and her shoulders relax.

“Ruth, is there anything you want to add?” I ask.

“Eventually the food outside is going to run out.” She shrugs. “I think we all knew it, but no one was wanted to address it. The problem is becoming more evident now because we’re no longer the only clan stocking up. We loot books and others focus on fuel and weapons. Regardless of that, we all share the need for food.”

“In the past it’s been suggested that we divide the scavengers into two groups and have them rotating. Do you think this is still a useful suggestion?”

“Put me on the spot why don’t you.” Ruth runs her fingers through her tight braids and exhales. “Rotations were never going to help. Not long term anyway. Frequency of supply is an issue, it always has been. Even before the Thirst. Trying to supply at the same rate as demand, it’s the bane of human existence. But we’ve reached a stage where there’s no longer one issue, there’s two: a decreasing supply to a higher demand, and the lack of production. Without working warehouses, nothing’s being created. We’re surviving off supplies from a decade ago.”

“What are you suggesting?” I ask.

“We need a production industry. Or an industry that focuses on food while scavengers can focus on other resources and tasks outside of the Junction.”

“It’s an idea we should look into,” Ellis says. “We have the population now to focus equally on both.”

“I guess the next question is how will we start food production. Are we referring to establishing a warehouse of some sort?”

“Come on, that’s a bit far fetched,” Yarren says.

“We could invest in farming,” Lionel offers.

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“Will it grow up here though? I didn’t think the soil was rich enough up here,”

Dr. Rubert asks.

“I don’t think it is,” Pip says. “It’d probably have to be native food that we farm. I wonder though, while farming might help our production issue, will it make us more of a target?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well, if we start farming in the Junction, then we literally root ourselves to this land.”

“We’re like that now anyway with our caravans.”

“I know, but if word spreads around to the Narvs and Crossers that we have an established farm, they’ll target us and our resources. Why will they put in the hard yards of farming for themselves when we can do the hard work and they steal it?”

“Always the chance they could do more. Like torch us as well as the crops,” Yarren says. Odette bites her lip at the thought.

“I doubt it’ll get as extreme as that. If they wanted to do that, they would’ve done so already,” Pip says.

“Okay, so farming is an option, but if it went ahead we’d have to be aware of the attention it brings and what seeds we crop. Any other suggestions?”

“I apologise if this suggestion is insensitive, considering our recent loss, but maybe our efforts should be refocused on hunting animals, like wild dogs. Or maybe we could capture a few and try breeding them ourselves,” suggests Ruth.

The energy alters across the room. Odette’s eyes widen in shock. I’m not surprised; she used to own about four dogs. Ellis and Dr. Rubert, nod in agreement.

“Another viable suggestion.” I scribble on my piece of paper. “I fear we’re running out of time. We still have the other industries to discuss, plus another idea I’d

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like to put forward. Would you all be willing to meet this time next week to discuss the production industry more deeply?”

A few nod, the other mumble. Either way, they all agree.

“Great. Feel free to discuss it with others. They might have ideas we haven’t considered.”

Dr. Rubert, Pip, Lionel and Yarren all give updates on their industries. Unsurprisingly, supply levels are the biggest issue they all face. On several occasions the debate between farming, hunting or scavenging riles up again, but I manage to get the discussion back on track.

“Before we conclude, there’s one last idea I’d like to put forward. We don’t have to discuss it tonight, but I’d like you to all consider — ”

“Spit it out already,” Yarren says.

“Fine,” I take a deep breath, preparing for the backlash. “I think we should consider the concept of arrange marriages.”

Marnie

You'd think after a year of scavenging, my muscles would be used to the exhaustion. It seems no matter how many treks I do, how many miles I walk or how many kilos I cart, my body isn't strong enough to avoid the suffering.

"Do you want a hand?" Teddy asks.

I nod, wiping away the drops of sweat that run down my cheeks and neck.

Teddy grabs two of my ten-litre water bottles from my trolley and drops them into his.

Ash turns around, notices the exchange and furrows her brows. Technically our loads should be evenly weighed, but our leader, Ruth, turns a blind eye when it concerns Teddy and I.

"We need a ute soon," he says.

"No shit."

We push along the cracked Canarvon-Mullewa Road, the only strip that leads us in and out of the Junction. Up ahead, facing west, a slither of darkness remains on the horizon. A few stars speckle above it. Behind us, the sun peaks over the ranges. Very soon blacktop will be radiating heat as hot as the sun. It doesn't help when you're wrapped up in layers of padding and protection.

"Pothole," someone calls from up front.

Teddy and I swerve to the left, avoiding the hole by a good metre. Others aren't so lucky. Not even a minute later and metal crashes into the bitumen. Bottles fly out of the trolley with a clunk. One even bursts on impact.

"Motherfucker," Mitch yells, kicking the trolley.

"Easy, kid," Ruth says. "We still need to use it."

She drags it out of the hole, while a few of the others grab the runaway goods. Once Mitch calms down, we're on our way again.

The Junction: A Short Story

There's a somber tone to this scavenge. Usually there's chatter from dawn to dusk. Darvill would blabber on about his missus, Briggs would challenge opinions left, right and centre, while Ash would dream about the future. But we'd all talk about the forbidden topic: the past. Our taboo discussions are a secret we've all kept. While we know it's against Jeff's rules, we also know it's what's brought us together. I know these scavs better than I knew my own family. But today, there are no secrets being shared. We know for some of us this could be our last trip. Who knows for sure? All we've heard is that they're reconsidering the industry.

I wish I knew what I wanted. That way I could decide what side to fight for. Scavenging is what's helped me through the last year or so. It saved me from the Thirst, eased the pain of losing my brother and distracted me when Garrick left.

Despite the rumours that have circulated since last weeks meeting, my gut tells me they'll still keep scavenging as an industry. How else will we collect bottles, clothes and Jeff's cigarettes?

"You're strangely quiet," Teddy says.

"Just thinking."

"Normally you'd be throwing thoughts my way."

"Decided you deserved a break."

"You're too kind. Seriously though, what's up?"

"Trying to savour all this, y'know. Next time there's a scavenge, who knows what it'll be like?"

"I know what it'll be like. It'll be shit."

His honest makes me smile.

"Yeah, it will be."

The Junction: A Short Story

“I still remember your first scavenge,” he chuckles. “You kept creeping around the towns like you were some sort of secret agent.”

“Fuck off. Did not.”

“Did too,” he smirks.

His shit stirring gets me talking, and we reminisce on past scavenges, the surprises, the struggles and the successes. On one occasion, we had a spare moment to venture down to the beach. It wasn't our intention to go swimming, but that's what happened. The two of us swayed with the waves, blissfully oblivious of the reality we'd have to return to.

Of course, there have been some dire trips. It's to be expected when we hit the North-West Coastal Highway. After that intersection, it's cannibal territory. I reckon I've used my gun more times out here than I did in the Navy. We avoid it if possible. Once a shot is fired, it draws attention. Before you know it, you're fighting off a dozen of them. From experience, I've learnt the best method of attack is to get as close and personal as you can. Once you're in arms reach, it's a swift slash across the neck.

It's not just the Narvs we've had to finish off. Sometimes it's our own. A handful have been wounded beyond repair and a couple have suffered severe heatstroke. We've even had a Scav tempted to join the Narvs. What she saw in them, I'll never understand. Nevertheless, we made sure she didn't stand a chance. Last thing we needed was another cannibal roaming about.

Regardless of the 'why', there's unspoken agreement amongst us Scavs: if you're a liability, you're gone. Not necessarily the same belief Jeff would uphold, but we have to play by a different rulebook out here.

“Right, lets knock off.” Says Ruth.

The Junction: A Short Story

She leads us towards a leaning red gum that's about a hundred metres off the road. Over the years the coastal winds have forced the gum's trunk to grow sideways. With its low height and leafy branches providing ample cover, it's a perfect hideaway from the midday heat.

It's not easy pushing the trolleys through the sand, but the alternative is leaving them out on the road, which exposes our position and potentially losing valuable stock. Once we're all concealed, Mitch grabs a broken branch and uses the leaves to brush away our sand trail.

"Briggs and Vin, you're on first watch," says Ruth. "Ash and Dane, in two hours time take over. We'll set off again at sunset."

Before we catch some sleep, most of us use the opportunity to fill our bellies a little. The food we're given has to last us two weeks, sometimes three. If you scoff it down in one go, that's your fault. Don't expect anyone to share.

"So, what's this bullshit about Jeff shacking us all up together?" Mitch says after finishing his protein bar.

"Do *not* get me started." Ash slams her hand into the sand. "It's absolute rubbish."

"I know, I know," says Ruth. "Trust me, I argued against it. But — "

"But Jeff's going to go through with it." Ash shakes her head. "Fucking bastard."

A week has passed since the clan's last committee meeting, but it's still been the talk of the town. Even out here, in the middle of nowhere during a scavenge, the clan's troubles have followed us.

"So what's his plan? Dress everyone up and have a rose ceremony?" I smirk.

The Junction: A Short Story

“Don’t think you’ll be laughing when you’re the one getting hitched,” Ash warns.

“Why’s he doing it anyway?” Teddy asks Ruth.

“The man’s got plans. I’ll give him credit; the future he’s working for is a good one. It’s just how he’s going about it that’s wrong.”

“No kidding,” Mitch says.

“What are his plans then? Does it involve the industry changes as well?”
Teddy says.

“Yeah, it does. He’s thinking long term. Wants to offer us as much as he can, but he can’t do that with the numbers we’ve got. That’s where you guys come in. The idea is once you’re married, you pop out a few kids and the population grows.”

“No fucking way I’m brining a kid into this world,” Ash says.

“It’s not that bad,” Ruth laughs. “Where I think Jeff’s got it wrong is that he’s taking away your freedom, your right to choose.”

“Maybe you should take his spot,” Jeff winks.

“Nah, I’m good out here thanks.”

“What would *you* do if you were in his shoes?” I ask.

“Honestly, I don’t know.” She runs a hand through her dreadlocks. “Don’t get me wrong, Jeff’s a good guy. He’s just not looking at the big picture. It’s one thing to have a plan, but you can’t fuck over others in the process. *How* you get there is just as important.”

Marnie

My thin braids whip against my cheeks, making my skin sting. Teddy laughs each time one gets caught in my mouth.

“Should just shave it all off,” he laughs.

“Like you can talk.” I tug at his beard, making him flinch.

When we first met he was baby faced. His long, narrow jaw emphasised by the starvation that was spreading across the state. Despite his sunken cheeks and gaunt frame, he still showed a hopeful spirit. With the beard now reaching his shoulders, his face looks fuller, healthier. It also makes him look a few years older than I am.

“Maybe we should stock up on razors next scavenge,” he jokes.

“Yeah, who needs food these days? Personal hygiene clearly takes priority.”

He smirks and stares down at the spanner he’s fiddling with. His rusted bike is tipped on its side in the sand, only half way through it’s monthly maintenance.

“Who knows if we’ll scavenge again? It’ll be interesting what they decide.

Can’t imagine there’s an easy solution to fixing our stock problem,” I say, while toying with my dog tags.

“I think it’s safe to say that no matter what they choose, we’ll be redistributed,” he says before jumping off the patio ledge. Sand puffs around his bare feet as he lands. Wiping his palms against his torn jeans, he leans his bike against his thigh and gets back to work.

“Where do you think you’ll go?”

He shrugs. “Depends on the roles they introduce. It’s not like I’ve got a whole bunch of skills to offer, so they’ll slot me in where I’m needed.”

The Junction: A Short Story

“You could be a mechanic.”

He looks at me in confusion, caught between taking me seriously or laughing at a joke.

“We’d need cars for me to be a mechanic again.”

“Okay, okay. Let me rephrase it. You could be a *bike* mechanic. Or even a transport officer. You could decide what transport we need to reintroduce again and — ”

“I’m going to stop you right there,” he says smiling. “All they’ve suggested is that they’re considering a farming approach to our stock shortage. Nothing about transport. Don’t get too ahead of yourself, bud.”

“I know, I know. I’m just saying there are options.”

“Yeah, they just probably won’t come around during our lifetime.”

“If you think like that they won’t. If you want change, you make change.”

“And what change do you want?” He looks up from his bike.

A part of me wishes he was referring to the change in industries, but deep down I know what he’s referring to. Changing our roles within the clan wasn’t the only alteration made after yesterday’s meeting. The suggestion of arranged marriages was agreed upon too. While they didn’t find a match for me, they found one for Teddy. You’d think it’d be the first thing we’d talk about given our recent history, but neither of us have uttered a word. Not directly, anyway.

“I just want to keep scavenging,” I reply.

“I’ve never understood why you like scavenging so much.” He focuses back to the bike, spinning a wheel.

“Reminds me of the past I guess. Heading out to sea, exploring international waters for a while, come back to base. Scavenging’s the same except it’s sand.”

The Junction: A Short Story

He shakes his head. "I still don't get it. How could you not miss home? I can barely stand being away from this place for a few days."

"Don't get me wrong, I missed home to begin with. But over time the ship became home." I shrug. "Besides I don't mind leaving this place every few weeks. Gives me a chance to remember where I came from. I feel like you can't do that around here."

"Yeah, I get that. I can't even remember the last time I spoke about my family, or my old mates." He pauses and stares out into space, probably trying to recover the memories he thought he'd lost. "Did I ever tell you about my dog?"

"No, you haven't."

"Probably the only time I've cried is when she died."

"Really? After everything that's happened, your dog dying is the only thing that's made you cry?"

"Don't get me wrong, losing my family and friends sucked, but I knew anything was possible during the Thirst, so I expected the worst," he says, tightening a bolt. "When Millie died, it was sudden. A car crash. Some bozo hooning around. How the fuck was I supposed to expect that?"

The fly wire door creaks just as I'm about to speak. Jeff appears in its frame.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says, "I was wondering if I could borrow you for a sec, Teddy?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"I was hoping you could spend some time with Jenny." His tone makes it sound like an order, rather than a request. "I hear you haven't spoken to her since the announcement."

"I've been busy," he says bluntly before returning his attention to his bike.

The Junction: A Short Story

“I know your time is limited, but that’s even more reason to speak to her. She’ll be your wife soon.”

“Bloody hell. Can I meet her when I’m done with the bike?” he says, dumping his spanner into the sand.

“Well, I’d prefer it to be now.” Jeff rubs the back of his neck.

“Why?”

“Because she’s already here.”

Jenny awkwardly appears, holding her hands in front of her and bowing her head.

“Oh,” is all Teddy manages to say.

“I’ll leave you to it,” I say, disrupting the silence.

No one says anything, but Teddy’s face is begging me to say. A mixture of “Save me” crossed with “What the fuck do I do?”

I give him a reassuring smile as I duck out the side gate.

Marnie

It's bizarre travelling around town. During scavenges, it takes days to reach another location. Around the Junction, I walk a few steps and I'm where I need to be.

It takes less than a minute to reach Teddy's caravan on the outskirts of block sixteen. He shares it with a few other builders, but at this time of day they're out doing their duties*. I assume this won't be Teddy's caravan for much longer. No doubt Jeff is probably racking his brain over caravan allocations just to accommodate the new couples.

I go to open the door, expecting it to be unlocked but it isn't.

"Hello?" I tap on the door.

"Marnes." The fly wire blocks Teddy's face, but he's panting behind it. "What are you doing here?"

"To see you, what else?"

"Right, right." He runs a hand through his hair. "Look, now's not really a good time."

"Is Jenny here?"

"No, what makes you say that?"

"Because you're acting weird."

"No, I'm not."

"Yeah, you are." What the fuck's going on?"

I can't see his face clearly, but I can sense his hesitation.

"If you come in, you can't tell anyone, alright?"

The lock clicks and he holds the door open. It's wide enough so I can squeeze through. As soon as I'm in, he locks the door again.

The Junction: A Short Story

The caravan's a decent size; four bunks and a booth. It just looks smaller than mine because shit's dumped everywhere. Empty paint cans are stacked up like bricks, old laundry carpets the floor, and there's trashed cans and bottles scattered across the table. Looks exactly like the same as the last time I was here, except now there's a backpack on Teddy's bed, its seams about to burst.

"What's this?" I turn to him but he can't look back. "What *is* this, Teddy?"

"I'm leaving." He whimpers.

"Were you going to tell me? Or were you just going to walk out without a word just like everybody else has?"

"I don't know. I just needed to get out of here."

"Because of the whole Jenny thing?"

"All of it."

"I know things are going to change but — "

"They already have changed. The discussions alone have made people think differently."

I reflect on the past month, throwing my thoughts back to before the meetings. Back then, people had accepted that things happen by chance. Now Jeff is forcing change. Obviously there were rules before. The basics, like don't take more than you're allocated ration. But it's not just rules that are enforced anymore, it's total control too. Control over what we do, who we love. The freedom that I felt when I first joined is disappearing.