

A Climate Change Story, by Lucy Leja

The sirens wailed. Children shrieked in their mother's arms. Uniformed officers herded billions of panicking people towards oxygen chambers by the fire escapes, dishing out masks and tanks full of oxygen. I cursed under my breath as another fool grabbed a tank before I could reach it. Shoving adults and children out of the way, I grabbed the nearest mask and tank and strapped it on with fumbling fingers. What happened? Did something explode? Collapse? No leader should be this clueless. *Find out later. Stay alive.* I told myself.

It's been 127 years since the Earth's surface became uninhabitable for humans. 127 years since the peak of the climate crisis. For four generations, my family has kept the earth's growing population safe underground, living off the oxygen made by plants we managed to salvage once our base was ready for use. By then, most plant life on the surface had perished from the heat, cold, or rising sea levels.

I joined the flood of people heading up the stairs, stepping past those who were too unfit or old to climb the tall staircase which led to the barren wasteland that was the surface. I tried to listen to people's conversations. I needed to find out what happened. I caught snatches of whispered words or sobs.

"...burst..."

"...exploded..."

"...ocean.... Flooded..."

"...drowned... awful..."

But two sentences stood out the most. "What now?" and "How many left...?"

I had to find out more from my advisors but I didn't know where they were. Everyone would have to regroup once they reached the surface. Gasping, I finally reached the top of the stairs. Only one door left. One that requires an authorisation code to pass through. "LET ME THROUGH!" I called. The people who recognised my voice backed away, letting me rush past.

As I reached the keypad, that's when the screaming started.

It started with a single shriek. Then, like a chain reaction, people started shouting, screaming, and begging to be saved. I heard splashing and roaring and alarmed screams of "Water!!"

"Help me!!"

"Let me out!"

"My daughter! Where's my daughter?!!!"

Quit panicking. My head screamed at me. *They're relying on you.* Right. Stop panicking. Keypad. Code. 1789. Door... door... OPEN THE DOOR. I lunged at the handle, wrenching open the thick, insulating door.

A wall of heat slammed into me. Mask on and people in tow, I stumbled out into the light and blazing heat. This place... I thought, racking my brains, this place used to be Great Britain. I'd seen pictures. Pictures of what it had been like. Rolling green fields, lush forests, streams, lakes, and beautiful castle ruins. Now, you wouldn't even think this was planet Earth. The earth was dusty, cracked and dry. There were hills, but there was either no grass or yellowed, dead grass. Bare trees loomed like skeletons of life that were long gone. If I touched the trunk, it would crumble, I was sure of it.

I had to find an officer. How... Phone! All officers and important members of this society owned a mobile device that used to be used all the time by people back in the early 21st century. I pulled out the device and rang my most trusted officer.

He picked up after five rings.

"Yes, Sir!"

"What happened, Sergeant?"

"Implosion of the Atlantic Ocean Sector, Sir. Number of survivors is still to be determined, Sir."

"Did you make it out?"

"Yes Sir. From the London Passage. A sign says Picadilly."

"Call other officers, Sergeant. Find out where they are. Once done, call me again to discuss a rendezvous point."

"Yes, Sir!"

A buzz indicated the call was over. Now my job was to find out where we were and calm these screaming people down. My sergeant had told me the Atlantic Sector has imploded. That was one of our largest sectors, so having the ocean flood it would be devastating to our numbers. Water travels fast, and it made it here fairly quickly. The sirens had only been going off for a few minutes or so.

Now for where we are...

I turned around to find hundreds of tear-filled eyes staring at me. There was a tug at my leg. Then a snuffle. I looked down to find a little girl. Probably about 8, staring up at me with wide, scared eyes. "Mummy..." she whispered. Snot dribbled from her nose and I scrunched my face up in disgust. "Mummy fell... into the water. I couldn't find her...." The girl then began to wail. *Ugh, these children.* It wasn't *my* job to look after the brats. It was the job of the parents. I lead. I instruct. I rule. These people can't expect me to look after their snotty, snivelling *beasts*. Shaking the girl off my leg in disgust, I turned to

the adults watching me. "Somebody take her," I said. Nobody moved. "TAKE HER, NOW!" A young woman ran up and picked up the little girl, taking her back into the crowds. I shook myself off.

"Somebody find a street sign or something. We need to move quickly." Everyone scrambled away, off to complete their task.

Something was bothering me as I looked at the crowd as it split into small groups, running in all directions. All the clunky masks and tanks. *That oxygen won't last forever...*

We might not make it. There is not enough oxygen left in the atmosphere to support a human being, and all of our plants in the bunker gave just been drowned. For the first time in my life, I was scared. I was clueless and I *didn't know what to do*. That was what terrified me most. I had always known the right course of action to take. But now, when my life depended on it, my brain stopped working...

Time. Yes! Time! I need to figure out exactly how much time this oxygen will last us. There's a display. Yes! On the tank... it says...

My heart sank. Roughly five hours left. That's not enough time... *And blimey*, I thought, wiping my brow. It's *hot*. And... I'm thirsty. There's no freshwater around. At all. I sat down on a large rock. I don't know what to do.

Two hours. It has been TWO HOURS. I've been sitting on this rock, trying to think of a solution. All of the people have been searching for a roadsign or town somewhere. Probably dead due to the physical exertion. They're not used to exercising, so I'd imagine they'd get tired more easily, using up their oxygen faster. They were showing no signs of appearing.

I sighed, standing up. Guess I'll have to go by myself then. I began to walk slowly up a hill nearby. The higher the vantage point, the more I can see. In the distance, I could just make out some tall shapes. Is that a city? New hope sparked in my chest and I pushed onwards. *I... can... make it...* I whispered between each panting breath.

I think another hour or so had passed by the time I was three-quarters of the way to the city. That was when I encountered the first body. It was a middle-aged man. His clothes soaked through from sweat, cheeks red but lips and fingertips blue. He clearly ran out of oxygen. Too much exercise. I rolled my eyes, trying not to look at the pitiful sight.

Nearly there... I huffed.

Half an hour had passed. The city was so close now. Half a mile or so. Here I passed the next body. It was the eight-year-old girl, battered and bloodied, like she'd been attacked, also with blue fingertips and lips. No oxygen tank in sight. Her right arm was bent at an awkward angle, her forehead had a large cut in it that looked like it had been oozing blood not too long ago. One of her ankles was smashed to pieces, and a bloody rock lay nearby. She must have been attacked by someone whose oxygen was nearly gone. Someone who saw her as vulnerable so took advantage of it. Such cruelty twisted something in my stomach but I shook it off. The city was so close now. I had to survive. I had to.

When I finally made it to the city, I was exhausted. The time it took for me to get there had passed in a blur. I collapsed on a piece of rubble and checked my oxygen levels. Roughly two and a half hours. I swore loudly. I still had no idea what to do. My phone was also dead. I couldn't get in contact with my sergeant (who was probably already dead). Dazed, I looked around. Huge concrete structures towered above me, looking like they were on the verge of crumbling, wires hung loosely. I think they used to carry electricity. Then I saw them. One or two very very old electric cars. I scoffed. That was honestly a pathetic attempt at reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Looking at where I was at that moment, dying, many others dead... it was infuriating. *Why* weren't they more careful back then, when they still had the chance to stop the extinction of the earth? *Why*.

Then there was the sound of rocks being kicked, wheezing, then a thud and a cloud of dust, not too far from where I sat. Groaning I got to my feet and stumbled over to the cloud. Gasping. Someone was there. A woman, a similar age to me, lay on the ground, eyes mostly shut, wheezing and gasping for air, with "0 Mins" displayed on her oxygen tank. She was dying. In front of me. I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.

Slowly her eyes met mine and her eyelids drooped even more. One of the steps of oxygen deprivation: the victim falling unconscious. I kept watching. My breathing started becoming more laboured. Hers started slowing down. Then her eyes closed. And I knew there was no saving her now.

I backed away slowly. I just watched someone die. And I was probably next. Tears began to blur in my eyes. *I don't want to die... I don't want to die... Please don't let me...*

A sob shook my body. Curse those people from the 21st century. It's not FAIR. I haven't lived. I haven't... Another sob.

Why would they let this happen? Who am I kidding? I know. For profit. The oil and gas industries made so much money. It would have been 'too much effort' to look for more sustainable options so that means they were lazy too. And what did that laziness result in? The extinction of the human race. Money hasn't even held proper value for over a century now. What idiots. What absolute idiots. Their great-great-great grandchildren... dying horribly because of their mistakes, ignorance, and laziness.

A long beep came from my oxygen tank. I checked it. One hour left. What could I do with my final hour on Earth? Classmates used to ask me that all the time when I was little. "What would you do if you were the last person left alive?"

"What would you do if you only had one hour left to live?"

I finally have the answer.

Cry.

All I can do at this moment is cry and think repeatedly: *It's not fair... I don't want to die...*

It's almost amusing how I say I don't want to die, yet I continue to cry. It'll only waste my oxygen faster, I know that. But I can't help it. I'm still young. I still had so much left to live for.

But there is nothing now. Earth is a barren wasteland. Destroyed and abandoned. There wouldn't actually be that much left to live for. Nothing to work for, nothing to gain, nothing to lose. What is left of the human race is useless and dying. Money is an idea. It holds no value anymore. If I could ask the people in the past one question, it would be: Was it worth it? All of the murder, lying, laziness. Was it worth it? Just for money and other reasons. My thoughts began to cloud over...

A light breeze stirred my hair, calling for me to let go and move on. Another loud beep disturbed the silence. 10 minutes left...

I've just finished recounting all of the events of the day. The minutes pass like seconds as I stare at the grim sky, weeping.

Beep...

5 minutes.

The silence is deafening. Too loud. I still feel fine but I know there's little time for me left. I'm starting to think of what could have been. Would I have had a family? Would I have had kids? I'm not so sure,

Beep...

4 minutes.

Is there an afterlife? When all of this is over? If there is one, I'm not so sure I want to live in it. After all of this torture. Would the past generations have already destroyed the alleged bliss of the afterlife and moved on, leaving a mess for their children to try and fail at fixing?

Beep...

3 minutes.

I can't think properly anymore.

Beep...

2 minutes.

I'm tired... so so tired.

Beep...

1 minute.

I take one last look at the dead place around me and a final tear slips down my cheek. This is the end. The last thing I'll see is a dead, hideous street. I think again: *I don't want to die...*

But it's too late.

Beeeeeeeeeeep...

The final beep sounds, longer than the rest, and I feel the oxygen supply stop. The gasping begins. My thoughts suddenly start flowing in a rush but my brain is too tired to properly comprehend them. Only a few stand out. They are of the older generations. Their selfishness. How this was not fair. How I don't want to die.

The tiredness is becoming overwhelming. I'm falling asleep... forever...

And my final thoughts before I fall asleep, I feel right now are important... but I can't... quite remember why... I just know what they are... and they're asking you and all of the other adults of your generation... I think...

Was it worth it?